"The story pulls you in, and doesn't let go."
STEPHEN HARDING
New York Times bestselling author of *The Last Battle*

THE LAST VIKING



THE TRUE STORY OF KING HARALD HARDRADA

DON HOLLWAY

OSPREY

THE LAST VIKING



OSPREY
PUBLISHING

For Harald

May I be his last and greatest skald

The Last Viking



THE TRUE STORY OF
KING HARALD
HARDRADA

DON HOLLWAY

CONTENTS

Maps
List of Illustrations
Acknowledgments

Introduction

PART ONE

I Seven Feet of English Ground
II Eye of God
III Exile
IV Kievan Rus
V Miklagard

PART TWO

VI Varangian
VII Command
VIII Holy Land
IX Sicily
X Uprising
XI The Burner of Bulgars

XII Reign of Terror
XIII Revolution
XIV Blinding
XV Power
XVI Lover
XVII Downfall
XVIII War
XIX Escape from Byzantium

PART THREE

XX Prince of the Rus
XXI Denmark
XXII Treachery
XXIII Kings of the North
XXIV Thunderbolt of the North
XXV Dragon Ships
XXVI Hard Ruler
XXVII The Battle of the Nisa
XXVIII Sweden
XXIX England

PART FOUR

XXX Stamford Bridge

Epilogue: The Last Viking

A Note on Sources

Bibliography
Plates

MAPS


Byzantine Empire and Surrounding Lands, 11th Century
Kiev
PECHENEG KHANATE
Black Sea
THRACE
Constantinople
PAPHLAGONIA
Thessaloniki
Bari
APULIA
CALABRIA
THRACESIAN THEME
ANATOLIA
Berkri
Melitene
Palermo
Messina
Sardis
Sewerak
KALBID EMIRATE
Syracuse
CIBYRRHAEOT THEME
Edessa
LYCIA
Antioch
Aleppo
N
W
E
S
Mediterranean Sea
Damascus
ZIRID EMIRATE
Jaffa
Jerusalem
FATIMID CALIPHATE
FATIMID CALIPHATE
Cairo
0
250
miles


Northern Europe, 11th Century
ICELAND
Reykholt
Norwegian Sea
Stiklestad
Trondheim
NORWAY
JAMTLAND
HALSINGLAND
SVEALAND
FINLAND
Lake Ladoga
SHETLAND ISLANDS
Oslo
Sigtuna
Birsay
ORKNEY ISLANDS
Vänern
Novgorod
SCOTLAND
GOTALAND
Battle of Nisa
North Sea
Viborg
DENMARK
Baltic Sea
KIEVEN RUS
Hedeby
York
POLAND
N
W
E
S
FRISIA
ENGLAND
0
100
miles
NORMANDY
Kiev

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Portrait of Harald in stained glass, St. Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall. (Colin Smith / *Harald Hardrada* / CC BY-SA 2.0)
Olaf the Saint Falls at the Battle of Stiklestad by Peter Nicolai Arbo (1859). (Photo by Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images)
A Viking boat being hauled out of a river and portaged around rapids. (Artwork by Steve Noon, © Osprey Publishing)
St. Sophia Cathedral in Kiev, Ukraine. (anmbph/iStock/Getty Images Plus)
Axe-wielding Norsemen inside city walls. (Artwork by Johnny Shumate, © Osprey Publishing)
The Hagia Sophia, Istanbul. (Emad Aljumah/Moment/Getty Images)
Manuscript illustration of Greek fire. (Image taken from the holdings of the Biblioteca Nacional de España, CC BY 4.0)
Manuscript illustration of George Maniakes landing at Messina. (Image taken from the holdings of the Biblioteca Nacional de España, CC BY 4.0)
Mosaic depicting Jesus between Empress Zoe Porphyrogenita and Constantine IX. (DEA/G. DAGLI ORTI/DeAgostini/ Getty Images)
Fresco depicting the daughters of Yaroslav I. (SPUTNIK / Alamy Stock Photo)
The *drakkar* or dragon ship. (Artwork by Steve Noon, © Osprey Publishing)
A Viking sea battle. (Artwork by Johnny Shumate, © Osprey Publishing)
The Viking disembarkation and subsequent battle of Fulford by Matthew Paris. (History and Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo)
The battle of Stamford Bridge by Matthew Paris. (The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo)
The Battle of Stamford Bridge by Peter Nicolai Arbo (1870). (The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo)

Monument to Harald Sigurdsson in Oslo, Norway. Relief by Lars Utne, 1905. (Wolfmann, CC BY-SA 4.0)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Last Viking is dedicated to King Harald III Sigurdsson, called Hardrada. As his biographer, in making sure he's never forgotten, I would be remiss if I forgot to acknowledge the many people who have helped me tell his story.

Fellow re-enactor Carl Gnam, publisher of *Military Heritage* magazine, and Ed Zapletal, publisher of *History Magazine*, are friends who have done much more for me than furnish favorable reviews. Special thanks to my editors at HistoryNet.com: Carl von Wodtke at *Aviation History* magazine, who, when after a twenty-year hiatus I took up writing again (on a computer instead of typewriter), remembered me from the old days and set the standard by which all other editors are compared; and Stephen Harding at *Military History* magazine, who not only published my work but thought enough of it to introduce me to his – our – agent.

The folks at Osprey Publishing, part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, have been more than patient with a magazine writer venturing into a book-publishing world: in New York, Rayshma Arjune, Publicity Manager, Special Interest, Bloomsbury USA; in England, Emily Neat (*née* Heagerty!), Osprey Head of Marketing; Gemma Gardner, Osprey Senior Desk Editor, who polished my Old Norse; and above all, Kate Moore, Osprey Commissioning Editor, who saw something in *The Last Viking* – actually, in just the first few chapters – that lesser editors did not. I'm sure I drove you all a little bit crazy; as I write this, I probably still am. Thanks for indulging me, and thanks so much for making *The Last Viking* worthy of Osprey. For most of my life Osprey books have been my go-to source on any history topic. I have bookshelves full of them to prove it. I can tell friends in my history-buff re-enacting circles that I'm published and get a big "Meh." Telling them I'm published by Osprey, though, gets me instant street cred. (They all have

bookshelves full, too.) I am honored to be in the stable.

And, of course, thanks most of all to my agent, Scott Mendel, Managing Partner of Mendel Media Group LLC, who changed my life by reaching out to ask, “What do you know about Vikings?”

The rest, as they say, is history.

INTRODUCTION

In the high latitudes of the far north it feels as though the summer sun will never set, but when night falls it seems to last forever. By the mid-13th century, the day of the Vikings had long since gone dark. In Ireland, in 1171, the Norman-Irish – themselves partly the descendants of Vikings – captured Dublin, forcing its Norse-Irish king into exile. In 1263 the Scots under Alexander III repelled the attempt by Norway's King Hakon Hakonarson to reclaim rule over Scotland. By 1240 a new scourge of Christendom, the Mongols, had conquered the heirs of the Viking prince Rurik in the land of the Rus, and everywhere else the adherents of Christ had converted the sons of Odin to the new, supposedly gentler faith. The colony in Vinland – Newfoundland – had been abandoned, and those in Greenland were slowly withering. The entire North was growing colder, as the world slid from the benevolence of what we now call the Medieval Warm Period (*c*. 950–*c*. 1250) into the Little Ice Age. And this was all long after the fact; historians generally date the end of the Viking Age to an early autumn day in England in the year 1066.

Almost 200 years later and 500 miles away, at Reykholt in the far west of Iceland, it fell to one man to set down the history of Norwegian kings. There are no surviving portraits of Snorri Sturluson from life, but during his lifetime in the mid-13th century he was already famous across the North as the author of the *Prose Edda*, an account of Norse mythology. Scholar, writer, poet and historian, the "Homer of the North," Snorri was a Renaissance man well before the Renaissance. Lacking the traditional Viking skill in combat – he seems rarely if ever to have been involved in a fight, and may even have been something of a coward – Snorri instead parlayed his skill with words into a political career. At age fifty he was the richest and most powerful chieftain in

Iceland, a colony of ex-Norwegian outlaws and exiles. Twice elected as lawspeaker to the national parliament, the *Althing*, he was, for all practical purposes, an uncrowned king. Yet he had agreed to become a *jarl* (earl), a vassal of Norway's King Hakon IV, and to represent him to Iceland's bickering chiefs – or to play the ruler against them, which had turned out to please no one. Now, as both Norway and Iceland spiraled down into separate civil wars, Snorri seemed to recognize that for the feuding chiefs to rise above themselves would require deeds worthy of the sagas. He himself was not up to such tasks, but perhaps it would be enough to simply remind the Icelanders – the Norse – of the great deeds of their forebears, going back to the days of legend when mighty Odin led the ancient Aesir out of Asgard to become the first Scandinavians.

In the stony, moss-covered valley of the Reykjadalsa River, riven with geothermal vents and geysers, each known for centuries by its own name, Snorri moved into a farmstead near the hot spring called Skrifla. He fed its water via conduit into a circular, stone-lined outdoor bath that he named Snorralaug (literally "Snorri's Pool"), connected to his house by an underground tunnel. The *Sturlunga Saga*, written after his death about Snorri's powerful clan, the Sturlungs, includes a passage wherein Snorri and his friends relax together in this pool with drinks in hand, perhaps reciting the age-old sagas under the northern lights, or by moonlight scattered on silvery steam-clouds wafting across the valley from the nearby geysers.

Snorralaug and Snorri's connecting passage still exist today (if a bit overwhelmed by the big modern hotel, museum and gift shop clustered around them), thought possibly to be the oldest extant structures in Iceland. Archaeological excavations of the old farmstead have uncovered shards of French-style stemmed glasses; clearly Snorri lived life to the fullest. (In addition to being a renowned drinker, he was a notorious philanderer who fathered at least seven children by four different women.) One can sit on the flagstone patio and run a hand through the warm waters of the pool and imagine Snorri late at night, rising naked and dripping from these same waters and perhaps enjoying a quick, very Scandinavian roll in the snow. Then he totters, drink in hand, into the tunnel and up a spiral staircase into the writing studio of his Norwegian-style loft house, there to contemplate the collected tales that were to comprise his greatest work.

Snorri had several primary sources he could pull down off his bookshelf.

Heavy, leather-bound manuscripts, laboriously copied by hand, they were valuable beyond words, though in the wild old days an illiterate Viking looter would have considered them useful only as tinder and kindling. Snorri's personal editions are long lost, but copies survived. Two were named in later times for the condition of the vellum on which the originals were written: the *Morkinskinna* (*Moldy Parchment*) and *Fagrskinna* (*Fair Parchment*). Though each was inscribed around the year 1220, they are compilations of even earlier, lost accounts of the lives and deeds of Norwegian kings. The *Fagrskinna* reached over 400 years into the past – in Scandinavia, practically prehistory, so far back that many of the kings named are now considered partly or even mostly mythological. These sagas were recited orally, handed down by memory across generations – and naturally subject to induced errors – and then passed along until finally written down as if original and factual.

Snorri was responsible enough as an historian to know such sources needed cross-referencing, but in remote 13th-century western Iceland such information was hard to come by. He referred to the writings of the skalds, Scandinavian court poets or scribes who had known the kings of Norway firsthand, in some cases fighting at their sides and even dying with them in battle. Comparing their accounts with those of the anonymous scribes and chroniclers, Snorri felt confident of arriving at the essential truths.

"We base our story upon the songs which were once sung before the kings themselves, or their sons," he would write, "and accept as true all the tales of their feats and battles. For though it is true skalds praise most those to whom they sing, none would dare to tell a chief what he, and everyone who heard it, knew to be a lie about his deeds. That would not be adulation, but ridicule."

Disparity extends even to modern editions of Snorri's best-known work. There are numerous English translations available, but even between them discrepancies arise. For one thing, Icelandic, like Old Norse and Old English, uses several letters that do not exist in modern English, such as *thorn* (uppercase Þ and lowercase þ) and *eth* (uppercase Ð, lowercase ð). Our retelling uses the standard modern transliterations of *th* for the former and *d* for the latter. Also, in Old Norse, many names have a nominative case ending which tends to be dropped in most English translations (for example, *Haraldr* becomes Harald, and *Sveinn* becomes Svein). I have followed the usual approach with regard to this. The only exception is that I have used "Sigurdsson" instead of "Sigurdarson," as this spelling variant is common in

English translations and will be familiar to readers. When it comes to the Greek names in the narrative, I have used Anglicized versions, for ease of reading.

On top of the question of spelling is different translators' interpretations and the fact that the English language itself constantly changes. Victorian versions from little over a hundred years ago sacrifice literal translation for rhythm and rhyme – Norse poetry relies less on rhyme, even in the original languages, than on meter, symbolism and double meanings – while the later translations sacrifice the poetry for their more accurate wording. Who can say which better captures the original scribes' intent? Like Snorri, we can only compare and combine the various interpretations to come up with modern phrasing – including direct quotes and dialogue from the originals – that best expresses the language of the ancients.

Likewise, reconstructing events from a millennium ago requires a certain amount of conjecture and supposition if we're to do more than merely reprint the ancient sources. If we know a man was in a place at a certain time, and we know what that place and time were like, and what he was like, can we know exactly what he did then and there? Of course not – but in light of circumstantial evidence, we can make a guess so probable that it is all but conclusive.

History is a fog, a fog of uncertainty. The deeper one peers into it, the murkier and more uncertain the fog becomes. The instant any event has transpired and begins receding into the past it becomes vulnerable to memory and interpretation. Accurately reporting a specific fact – say, a direct quote by an individual at a specific time – necessarily requires a bit of faith. We can only learn what others, in most cases not present themselves at the time, claim was said and done, and surmise the rest. There are plenty of historians out there contending with a finite set of known facts. Few make their mark uncovering new knowledge. Most content themselves with avowing or disputing what is already known, these days in contest with every self-proclaimed expert with an internet connection. That is not the purpose of this work, nor of Snorri's masterpiece, known to the world as the *Heimskringla* (*The Circle of the World*), the name given to it in the 17th century from the translation of the first two words of the earliest surviving copy, *kringla heimsins.* Its most famous chapter is often referred to and reprinted as a standalone work, *King Harald's Saga.* Snorri described the source of his

sagas:

> In this book, I have written down the old stories as I have heard them from knowledgeable men, concerning kings who have ruled in the North, and among the Danes, and some of their families as well, according to what has been passed down to me. Some of it is found in old family records, in which the ancestry of kings and lords are written, and part is handed down from old poems and sagas which our forefathers ordered for their entertainment. Though we cannot say just how much truth they contain, still we can be sure that old and wise men considered them to be true.

Three quarters of a millennium later, we can do no less. We have the advantage of more sources than Snorri (see the notes and bibliography at the back of this book), for our subject is a king famed and remembered from England to Byzantium, from Kievan Rus to the Holy Land. If some of those sources contradict Snorri, or each other, or appear to be in error, we can only repeat them accurately, point out the contradictions, and try to winnow out the truth from among them. Very likely the differences between these many accounts can never be resolved. To do so is not our task. This book is neither analysis nor refutation (well, maybe a little), but a melding, comparison and recounting of the old tales, as Snorri did at his writing table, setting down his drink to light a tall candle late at night and put quill pen to calfskin parchment: “The sagas seem to me most authentic if they are properly interpreted and correctly repeated.”

We shall do the same, in a retelling of the legend of the last and greatest of Viking kings, Harald III Hardrada, the Hard Ruler.

Don Hollway, April 2020

PART ONE

The sun is rising dimly red,
The wind is wailing low and dread;
From his cliff the eagle sallies,
Leaves the wolf his darksome valleys;
In the mist the ravens hover,
Peep the wild dogs from the cover,
Screaming, croaking, baying, yelling,
Each in his wild accents telling,
"Soon we feast on dead and dying,
Fair-haired Harald's flag is flying."

Sir Walter Scott

I

Seven Feet of English Ground

The king of the East
Has been drawn westward
Toward a glorious death.
That is my destiny.
There the ravens
Will pick their fill
From the sovereign's warriors.
I'll be there to feed them.

King Harald's Saga

In September 1066, the question was whether England was to be Anglo-Saxon or Viking, and some 12,000 men had wagered their lives on the outcome. Two great armies stood fighting it out on the banks of the Ouse River just south of York, in the age-old fashion: smiting and striving, shield wall to shield wall, steel on steel. The high tide of the North crashed on the bulwark of the West, and doom awaited any man caught between. War drums throbbed, brass horns blared and warriors died cursing both old gods and new.

Near 7,000 strong came the Norse. Giant Norwegians in fierce-faced helmets and glittering mail. Ruddy-faced sea rovers from the Orkney and Shetland Islands eager to regain lost realms. And grizzled gray veterans with dented, plumed helms, scaled corselets and curved scimitars from the far corners of Kievan Rus, Byzantium and the Holy Lands. Their right flank,

farthest from the river, even included several hundred renegade English, for York had been Jorvik, capital of Viking Northumbria, since the sons of Ragnar Lodbrok had torn the lungs from its king Aella 200 years past. Not a few Northumbrians would happily see it become so again.

Some 4,500 Anglo-Saxons, however, disputed their path. The larger fraction of them were of the *fyrd*, local militia levied in times of trouble – villagers, farmers and shiremen, peasants lacking armor and bearing little more than spears, wood axes and slings, yet dangerous by their sheer number. The shield wall fronting them, on the other hand, was manned by better stock: true fighting men, mail-clad, bearing teardrop-shaped kite shields, notched swords, and murderous two-handed axes from the old Danish days, totally unsuited for woodwork but capable, in the hands of a skilled user, of beheading a horse or splitting a man in two. These were the *huscarls* – housecarls, literally house servants, household troops – the military core of Anglo-Saxon England: professional soldiers who ate at their lord's table, slept by his hearth, took his gold in payment, and died at his command. And they held the high ground.

Here at Fulford – "foul water ford" in the Old English tongue – the English line ran along a soggy, peat-bottomed ditch from an impassable riverside swamp to the banks of the Ouse. With water on both sides, they could not be bypassed. The Vikings had no choice but to go straight at them, but before they could even reach the foot of the enemy shield wall they had to plunge, in heavy gear and armor, exposed to arrows and javelins, through the waterlogged trench. From there they scrambled, off-balance and disordered, up the far bank, to die on spears stabbing from behind the impregnable wall of English shields, unbroken except where housecarls stepped clear for room to swing those terrible axes.

"The wound-rain [blood] fell across the field," reported the anonymous author of the *Morkinskinna*. "The Vikings waded in the blood of warriors." All afternoon the gully had been filled with the dead and dying, gurgling as the black peat-water covered their faces, tingeing it red as their fellows trod them into the mud. The slaughter was fearsome, the attack hopeless, retreat inevitable.

It came first on the Viking right, the flank nearest the swamp, where the Norsemen's English allies suddenly lost their enthusiasm for conquest. Breaking off their attack, they fell back in disarray, fearing to show their

backs too long to the rain of Anglo-Saxon arrows. The Northumbrians, peering over their shields from the gully bank, saw their chance. “The wing of the Northmen’s line nearest the ditch gave way,” wrote Snorri, “and the English followed, thinking the Norse would fly.” The Anglo-Saxon host poured down into the ditch and up the other side to give chase. In driving off the traitors and turning the Norwegians’ flank, they would end the Viking invasion in a stroke.

“The king’s banner was next to the river,” records the *Heimskringla*, “where the line was thickest.” Across the field from his weak-kneed allies, the King of Norway stood unperturbed by impending disaster. Harald III, son of Sigurd – called Harfager (*Harfagri*, Fairhair), the Burner of Bulgars, the Hammer of Denmark, the Thunderbolt of the North – was no quaking novice to battle. He was the most famed Viking of his age. By his own count he had conquered more than eighty cities, as far away as Sicily and the Middle East. “He was a mighty man,” admitted the German monk Adam of Bremen, writing scarcely a decade later of a king he had never met, yet detested and vilified, “and famous for the victories he had won in countless wars with the barbarians in Greece and Asia.”

“King Harald was handsome and noble,” Snorri wrote. “His hair and beard were yellow. He had a short beard, and long mustaches. One eyebrow was a bit higher than the other. He had large hands and feet, but these were well formed.” There would have been no mistaking Harald on the battlefield. His banner, called *Landeydan*, Land-Waster, of white silk bearing a black raven – for centuries the standard of Viking rulers, symbolic of the old father-god Odin – marked him out for all to see. And Harald, in 1066 fifty-one years of age, was a veritable colossus. His mail hauberk, hanging to mid-calf, would have draped to the ankles on any lesser man.

“Five ells was he in stature,” declared Snorri. The Viking ell, used in Iceland up to the 13th century, ran about eighteen inches, which would make Harald some seven and a half feet tall. As few Vikings carried measuring sticks, the ell was as a practical matter based on the length of an average man’s forearm from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger, and since Scandinavians (like all Europeans) in those days were shorter than today, averaging a little over five and a half feet tall, the ell would have been

correspondingly shorter, making the Norwegian king's height slightly less monumental, but still impressive.

Twenty years earlier Harald had taken the throne of Norway by right of blood: that of his legendary great-great-grandfather, King Harald Fairhair.[1] Their common given name, derived from the Old Germanic *here* and *weald* – army and leader – seems most apt. Not for several centuries, and certainly never to his face, would Harald III be called *Hardrada* – Ruthless, Tyrant, Hard Ruler – though few Norse kings would so well live up to the name.

His claim to the old North Sea Empire of Viking overlord Knut the Great, of which Northumbria had been merely a part, could not be justified by blood, except for that being shed on this battlefield. There were Northumbrians on both sides of this fight, many lords laying claim. Earl Morcar of York held the title mainly through the support of his brother, Earl Edwin of neighboring Mercia. Hardly out of their teens, they had been barefoot boys running through their father's hall when Harald was setting the crown of Norway on his own head. Their brother-in-law Aki the Tall and Earl Waltheof of Northamptonshire and Huntingdonshire, fighting at their sides, could not have been much older. If Harald was surprised the young lords fought so hard for lands held so briefly, it was because he had been ill advised by their predecessor.

Just a year earlier, in September 1065, the Earl of Northumbria had been Tostig son of Godwin – now overthrown, banished, a pirate and a rebel, but still the brother of England's King Harold II. It was Tostig who had talked Harald of Norway into this reconquest of Northumbria, and Mercia, and England, but it was also Tostig whose worthless force of bandits and marauders had lost their nerve and would soon lose the battle as well.

We can only imagine Harald's thoughts on seeing the young earls' housecarls splash across the watery trench, driving Tostig and his brigands before them. If the Northumbrians succeeded in running off the rebels, they would be able to envelop that end of the Norwegian shield wall and destroy it. It would have come as no great surprise to the king that trained housecarls would triumph over such rabble. He might well have expected it.

Even more likely, he'd planned on it.

There were only three ways to break a shield wall, all well known to King Harald: by direct frontal attack, which had this day been tried and failed; by

flanking maneuver, impossible with water to either side of the English; and by luring the defenders to abandon it themselves. Feigned retreat was a battle-tested Viking tactic, with which Anglo-Saxons appeared unfamiliar. (They would fall for a similar feint by the Normans a few weeks later, at Hastings.) With Morcar's Northumbrians now across the ditch, half the English line was overextended, leaving a gap between them and Edwin's Mercians. According to Snorri, Harald saw the opening: "He commanded the charge to be sounded, and urged on his men. He ordered the banner which was called the Land-Waster to be carried before him, and made so severe an assault that all had to give way before it."

Harald's lieutenants led the charge. Eystein, son of Thorberg, called Orri, "the Gorcock," for the red grouse of the Scottish Isles – from which we might deduce that he was small, red-haired and feisty – was, according to Snorri, "the most able and best beloved by the king of all the landowners." And skalds would sing of the prowess of Harald's own son, Olaf, then sixteen years of age and in perhaps his first battle. All threw themselves into the fighting. Northumbria was to be decided this day. To the strident call of the war horns the roaring Norwegians surged in behind the English.

The battle at Fulford had sundered into two battles, one along the ditch, one in front of it. Toward the river, the shield walls still opposed each other along the gully, but toward the swamp, the housecarls' pursuit of Tostig's men across it had exposed the peasants behind them. Vikings streamed across the ditch and up the bank into the breach in the English lines, simultaneously turning the Mercians' flank and taking the Northumbrians in the rear. If the English had prided themselves as great warriors for having defeated Tostig's pirates, they now learned the limits of their power. Not only Anglo-Saxons knew how to wield a two-handed axe. Harald's Norwegians had been hardened by fifteen years of fighting the Danes, and if they hadn't won that war, they had won most of the battles.

Slaying Aki the Tall, Eystein Orri bid his warriors wheel and take Morcar's men from behind. The housecarls chasing Tostig's rebels were brought up short by the screams of the fyrdmen in their rear, beset by mail-armored, sword-hacking Norwegians. Poorly clad farmers and peasants wielding pitchforks and hatchets could not long have stood such punishment.

For a time Edwin's Mercians stood against Harald's Vikings. Between them, along the line of the ditch, the blades of English axes and Norwegian

swords hewed and threshed like sickles laying low sheaves of wheat. “Mercilessly the king bloodied weapons on the English near the Ouse River,” declares the *Morkinskinna*. “A greater slaughter will never be inflicted on a brave army.”

With the Vikings pouring past them through the gap in the English lines, however, to avoid being flanked the Mercian left was forced to bend back around, toward the Ouse. The peasants behind the line, inside its curve, had a choice of being driven into the current with their housecarls on top of them, or, while there was still time, fleeing for York. It was not much of a choice, and nor did it take long for them to make it. Decades later the English monk Symeon of Durham admitted, “the English, unable to resist the Norwegians, turned tail, losing some of their men in the doing. Many more drowned in the river than fell in battle. The Norwegians had won the field of slaughter.”

King Harald Sigurdsson had taught the young English earls how to defeat a medieval shield wall, even one with the advantage of position. With the Mercians in retreat, all that was left was mopping up the Northumbrians. His son Olaf played a role in that. “Many sank in the river, and the sunken men drowned. The dead lay all around young Morcar,” lauds *King Harald’s Saga*. “The king put them to flight, and they fled most swiftly from Olaf the Mighty.”

Evening, in the long northern summer day, was still far off when the last of the Mercians had run for York and the last of the Northumbrians had either escaped by some little-known route through the swamp or lay fallen on the field. Vultures circled down over the battlefield and ravens plucked at dead faces. The Norse and their tame English searched the sward, dispatching the wounded, looting the dead, and seeking captives rich enough for ransom. Edwin had escaped with his men, and by some miracle Earl Morcar had also gotten away, though at the time even the Norse believed him dead. Earl Waltheof was taken alive, though Tostig, proving himself not very magnanimous in victory, advised Harald to kill him.

“Slay your prisoners as you like,” replied Harald, “but I will do as I wish with him.” He told Waltheof, “I will grant you peace if you swear never to war against me, and to send me word as soon as you learn plots are laid against me.”

Waltheof agreed, but would not swear to it, “for it looks to me as though Tostig does not intend me to inherit much at all.” He saw, as did everyone,

that the wayward earl meant to have Waltheof's shires along with the rest of the kingdom.

Harald ordered him released, much to the disgust of Tostig: "It is foolhardy to free a man whom you consider too honorable to require his word."

"I think," Harald told him, "that his word is more honorable than yours."

Tostig was neither stupid enough nor brave enough to rise to the insult. He changed the subject: "Let us march on London, and put the land to fire and sword, giving peace to neither man, woman nor child."

Now there was a plan dear to any Norseman's heart. Before London, however, there was York. The survivors of Fulford (including, according to some accounts, Earl Edwin) had taken refuge inside its walls. The town fathers, who unlike its peasants had much to lose, may not have been happy to have Vikings lording over them again, but with the conquerors drawing up outside the city walls, the decision to avoid a sack was a pragmatic one. "As King Harald had won such a decisive victory against such great chieftains and so large a host," recorded Snorri, "the people were fearful, and doubted they could stand against him. The city elders therefore decided, in a council, to tell King Harald they would hand over the castle to him."

After a few days to work out the details of the surrender, that Sunday Harald and Tostig convened a *thing*, a political assembly, outside the city walls. "They offered to grant a lasting peace to the citizens," reports the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, "as long as they all marched south together to conquer this kingdom."

The leading residents, well known to Tostig and singled out by him, came forth to deliver some 150 of their children as hostages to guarantee their fealty. The invaders, in turn, sent 150 men inside the city, nominally as counter-hostages, but in reality as a token garrison. Harald announced his return in the morning to appoint officials and declare new laws. York was to be Jorvik again, capital of a new, Norwegian Danelaw, and – if all went according to plan – of a new, Scandinavian England.

It was agreed they would all reconvene the next day, Monday, a few miles east of the city, where hostages would be brought to the Vikings from across the whole of Northumbria. The exchange was to be made where the old Roman roads from the eastern dominions came together to cross over the Derwent River, at Stamford Bridge.

On Sunday evening the Norwegians, with Tostig in tow, withdrew about two hours' march down the Ouse to Riccall, where they had beached their longships. Snorri said Harald was "very merry," as he had every right to be. The first step of the conquest was complete. The Northumbrian army had been destroyed, the Mercian army had fled, and half of England lay open for the taking. The Vikings had a base of operations with a cooperative, if not wholly sympathetic, populace to keep them well supplied and supported. Down in the south there was still the English king and his army to deal with, but for now it was time to celebrate. After victory and a two-hour march, it can safely be assumed that large quantities of alcohol were consumed, probably late into the night, and that there were some pounding headaches and bleary eyes on Monday morning when the horns roused the army early for the fifteen-mile march to Stamford.

Harald divided his force. One-third, including his son Olaf and brother-in-law Eystein, he ordered to stay behind to protect the ships. The other two-thirds, including Tostig, he deemed a sufficient show of force for a simple hostage exchange. The weather was clear and hot. "So the men laid aside their armor," wrote Snorri, "and went ashore with just their shields, helmets and spears, wearing their swords, and many had also arrows and bows. All were very merry."

"This is great foolishness, to go unprotected into our enemy's grasp," Tostig told Harald. "You can't trust the English if they gain advantage over you."

Harald had donned a blue tunic and his finest helmet, and mounted a black horse. He said (a little wearily, one can almost hear), "What do you fear now, Tostig?"

Tostig said, "I fear that you have lost your wits."

Harald did not kill him for that, but simply replied, "Be that as it may, I will do as I like."

Tostig, say the sagas, "was so disliked by the Norwegians that no one would listen to him." All could see that with Northumbria defeated, the English earl's usefulness was near an end.

The modern village of Stamford Bridge grew up around an ancient, natural rock ford across the Derwent River, almost 300 yards upstream from the

current crossing. Its name may derive from the Old English *Samfordesbrigge*, "the bridge at the sandy ford," or *stan ford*, "stone ford." Archaeologists have found evidence of several bridges over generations past. The earliest, about a mile south of the current one, dated from Roman times, when the town was called Derventio. In the 1200s a bridge of timber built on three stone piers lasted until the current stone arch was built, about seventy-five yards downstream, in 1727. Nothing has ever been found of the bridge that stood in Anglo-Saxon times, probably because, according to the old chronicles, it was all of wood. The concept of the wooden truss bridge with stress-bearing bracing, struts and stringers was well known to the Romans but lost to Dark Age Europe, not reappearing until about the year 1230. Until then medieval bridges, particularly short spans, were simple beam structures built on piles of elm or oak. Under good conditions these can last a very long time – oak piles used by Henry II to build old London Bridge in 1176 lasted until 1921 – but like the Ouse, the Derwent has a propensity to overflow even with recent, modern flood-prevention measures, and the 1200s bridge was probably necessary because what remained of the 1066 bridge had washed away. The current 1700s bridge still bears more than the average amount of traffic, but is only one lane wide, with traffic lights at either end stacking up long lines of vehicles. A parallel steel footway is closer to the size of the Saxon bridge: about the width one man can defend, swinging a two-handed axe.

At a brisk walk it would have taken the Norwegians about four and a half hours to cover the distance from Riccall to Stamford Bridge. Sunrise on September 25 is around seven in the morning local time, so the army would have reached the crossing about midday. Arriving from the south, they assumed high ground on that side of the river, where there was plenty of forage for the horses. (Vikings rode horses to battle, but seldom into battle.) Harald and Tostig took a party down the riverbank and across the bridge to a wide, more gently sloping meadow on the other side, where there was said to be cattle for the rustling. It was not long before they spotted a cloud of dust in the distance, above the road from York. Harald asked Tostig, "What is that yonder, a whirlwind or the dust of horsemen?"

"It is horsemen," replied the earl, thinking it the delegation from York, "and now behold you the good will of my people."

Harald was not so sure. "We had better halt and find out exactly who this is."

The oncoming multitude soon topped a rise about a mile and a half away, plainly no delegation but an army, spearpoints and armor glittering in the sun. Modern estimates put their number at 10,000 men afoot and 2,500 on horse – probably three times greater than that of Northumbria and Mercia together, and at least a third again that of the Northmen at hand. Above them fluttered a flag embroidered with the sigil of a fighting man. The sigil of King Harold II of England.

The last anyone in the north of England had heard, King Harold had dismissed his army from their summer-long watch on the southern coasts against an anticipated invasion by Duke William of Normandy, which had never come. That they could arrive in the north so swiftly after the arrival of the Norwegians was something of a miracle on the part of the English, and a terrible shock for the Norse.

A man came riding out ahead of them, asking for King Harald. Tostig recognized him. “Here comes Waltheof,” he said. “Slay him.”

But Harald forbade it. Reining his horse, Waltheof greeted the king, and advised him to turn back for his ships while he still could, “for King Harold my brother in arms opposes you with an overpowering army. You couldn’t stand him off if your men were fully equipped, let alone as they are now.”

Harald ignored this. “Farewell, Waltheof, and to your brother the king as well. You have kept your word as promised.”

As the young earl rode back, Harald turned to his men. “We had best lay plans, for they intend to attack and I have no doubt the king himself is leading them.”

Tostig said, “I think it best we retreat, quick as we can, to get our men and our armor, and there make a stand. Or else take to our ships, where those horsemen can’t reach us.”

“I have never yet run from a fight, and I won’t now, handing these Anglo-Saxons victory by being both chased and slain,” said Harald. “I have another idea. Put our three best men on our three best horses and have them ride hard and fast to summon the rest of our army. They’ll come at the run, and meanwhile these English will be in for a hard fight before we give ourselves up for lost.”

“It is for you to decide,” the earl told the king. “I have no wish to withdraw.”

Having nothing further to discuss with the English, Harald wheeled his

mount about to order his raven banner, Land-Waster, brought forward… and his horse stumbled and fell, throwing him to the ground in front of his men. And the enemy. Vikings took such bad luck seriously, considering it a portent of future events.[2] Having lost some of his dignity, Harald rose and declared, “A fall bodes good fortune for a traveler.” But on getting to its feet the horse ran off, and the king was heard to mutter, “Why now, brother Olaf?”

Hearing the King of Norway call upon his sainted brother, dead some thirty years past, Tostig laughed aloud. “You think King Olaf caused the horse to fall under you?”

“If he turns from me, I’ll have you to thank for it,” said Harald, and went off to see to his army, leaving Tostig with a small party on that side of the river to say what he would to his ex-countrymen.

There followed one of the most famous conversations in all of English history, in which Harald of Norway took little part, for he had never before been to England and may not have been fluent in Old English; otherwise the matter might have been settled between King Harold and King Harald, war leader to war leader. And yet he played the decisive role. It was recorded verbatim by numerous scribes and chroniclers, though almost certainly second or third hand, as the quotes vary in detail, undoubtedly distorted by the memories of differing eyewitnesses and a multitude of retellings and translations. Yet it is possible, weaving them all together to make a whole cloth, to listen to two feuding royal brothers decide the course of all England, based on the ambitions of a Norwegian king.

The Anglo-Saxon army is said to have halted about two bow-shots off, at most a thousand yards. Some twenty knights came forward, horses and riders alike armored in mail. These stopped a little closer to the Vikings, but three continued right up to Tostig’s party. The leader is described as not a big man, but slender, and most courteous, wearing a gilded helmet. (The Anglo-Saxons – at least, the wealthy ones – were famous for their ornate, full-face helms, as evidenced by those found in the Sutton Hoo and Vendel and Valsgarde burial sites.) He carried a red shield, said in the Norse sagas to bear the sigil of a golden hawk, but it was actually a wyvern, the two-legged flying dragon symbolic of Wessex. He called out, “Is Earl Tostig with this army?”

Tostig said, “There is no point in denying it.”

“Your brother, King Harold, sends God’s greetings,” said the knight, “and offers to atone for past deeds.”

Tostig asked, “What does he offer now that he did not before?”

“He regrets that offer now,” conceded the knight, “after all that’s been done.”

“We won’t set that right with money,” said Tostig. “What is his offer?”

“A fifth of England, no more. But you have laid waste the land, and for that must make amends.”

Tostig said, “I do not accept.”

The knight raised the bid. “You shall have all of Northumbria, and rather than fight you for it, he will award you a third of the kingdom to rule beside him.”

“That is preferable to the contempt and treachery he offered last winter,” said Tostig, “and if he had made such an offer then it would have saved many lives, and been better for England.” Nearly a thousand years later, the banished earl’s words still drip bitterness. “But it is too late for such bargaining. I have often heard the Norwegians say that if an acceptable offer were made I would quickly leave them to fight their own battles, but I will not.”

“Then hear the king’s final offer,” the knight said. “He would rather you have half of England, than you both fight over it, with the survivor to rule over all.”

And Tostig said, “But if I accept, what will he give King Harald Sigurdsson for his trouble?”

This was the crux of the matter, on which the future of all England would ride.

The horseman replied, “He has also spoken of this. He will give King Harald seven feet of English ground, or as much more as he is taller than other men, but no more.”

“Then tell King Harold to make ready for battle,” Tostig said, “and never let it be said that Earl Tostig betrayed King Harald Sigurdsson for his enemy, when he came west to fight for England. We would all rather die with honor, than lose the kingdom.”

“Then,” said the knight, “the king declares the blame for this business to be on your head.” He wheeled and with his silent companions rode back to the English lines.

Riding back from deploying his men, Harald asked Tostig, “Who was that man who spoke so nobly?”

“That,” the earl said, “was King Harold Godwinson.”

“You shouldn’t have waited to tell me that,” said Harald, “for they were so close that this Harold would never have returned alive.”

“It was risky enough for a man of his position, you are right,” said Tostig, “but I knew he would offer me peace, lands and title, and that I, on the other hand, would be his murderer if I gave him away. I would not break faith with him when he came trusting my honor, and if one of us must die I prefer that he killed me than I killed him.”

“He is a regal man, standing well in his stirrups,” mused Harald, “but he will not rule these lands long. Who was that, though, on either side of him?”

“One is named Helgi Heinreksson,” said Tostig, “and the other is called Biar-leif.”

And for the first time we see the mighty Harald Hardrada given pause. “I never thought I would see that man here,” he said, “for I know him, and I would not have come this far if I had known he was alive.”

To see the Thunderbolt of the North so taken aback must have come as a surprise to Tostig, who could only shrug. “It matters not to us now.”

Across the field King Harold Godwinson turned in the saddle to ask Leif, “Who was that tall man whose horse fell, with the blue kirtle and beautiful helm?”

“That was the King of Norway,” said Leif, who had not always gone by that name. In his youth, in Norway, his name had been Heming, and he had known King Harald Sigurdsson well, having been ordered by him to needless death out of nothing more than royal spite and, having survived, been forced to leave his home and family for exile in a foreign land. Now he rode at the side of a king, and gods old and new had seen fit to put his nemesis within his grasp.

“He is grim enough,” said the English king Harold of the Norwegian king Harald, “but not likely to live much longer, for I think his luck is spent.”

NOTES

1 So legendary, in fact, that many modern historians not only contend the later Harald's claimed lineage was a fictitious justification for his reign, but that the earlier Fairhair, who makes no actual appearance in contemporary records, was mythical, confused by old scribes with his descendant and credited with many of his accomplishments. Not knowing the difference, Sir Walter Scott probably had the earlier Harald in mind when he wrote "The Song of Harald Harfager" appearing herein.

2 Around the year 1000, Icelander Eirik Thorvaldsson, the Red, had tumbled from his horse while riding to join his son Leif's expedition to seek Vinland. Taking it as a bad sign, Eirik declined to go any further, yet the bad luck bore itself out. He missed out on the glory of Leif's discovery, and died without ever seeing his son's return.

II

Eye of God

Wind we swiftly
Our war-winning weft.
When sword-bearing warriors
Rush to the standards,
Take care, maidens, to spare not
One life in the battle!
We death-choosing sisters
Have custody of the slain.

The Saga of Burnt Njal

When divining the battle of Fulford, the Fates – Urth (Past), Verthandi (Present) and Skuld (Future), the three otherworldly women who weave men's destinies – must have come to the end of a strand and found it tied to its own beginning. Thirty-six years earlier, the story of Norwegian kings had been much the same. Having defied emperors, kings and his own subjects in ruthless pursuit of his personal ambition, a legendary ruler came out of the East to claim his land by virtue of blood and steel, only to have the people rise up in defiance of him. And at his side marched a young kinsman, barely old enough to have grown his first beard, but eager for his first taste of battle.

In the year 1030, wrote Snorri, Harald Sigurdsson was fifteen years old, "very stout and manly, as though full-grown," son of a royal house and already a leader of men. That spring he rode at the head of an army. As many as 700 Norse warriors had followed him from the Oppland, the uplands of

Norway near modern Oslo, some 200 miles into Jarnberaland, “the iron-bearing land,” modern Dalarna, Sweden. There camped Harald’s half-brother, the once and – if the two of them had their way – future King of Norway, Olaf II.

Twenty years older than Harald, Olaf, called “the Stout,” had first served as a teenaged mercenary fighting for England’s King Aethelred (sometimes called “the Unready” but more accurately “the Poorly Advised”). He had sailed his longships up the Thames River to London Bridge, fixed grappling hooks to the wooden span and, rowing hard downstream, pulled it into the water, allowing Aethelred to force Knut off the English throne. Olaf had admired the way the Frankish emperor Charlemagne had employed Christianity to unite his realm. When he took baptism and returned to Norway to wrest that throne from Knut himself, he proceeded to convert the country to the religion of peace, not caring whom he had to evict, maim, blind or kill to do it. Olaf had so alienated his nobles that they invited Knut, who had regained Denmark and England, to add Norway once more to his North Sea Empire, forcing Olaf into exile in Rus. But now Olaf, at the age of thirty-five, had returned with an army to reclaim his throne.

We can imagine the brothers’ embrace upon meeting again. Olaf’s exile could not have been easy for Harald, as kinsman of an outlaw king, particularly one who had left a trail of blood feuds and sworn vengeance in his wake. Norway was stirring restlessly on news of Olaf’s return. Harald, though, would have brought word that the resistance lacked leadership. Knut was not a king in residence, but ruled his empire from across the sea, in England. It was time for Olaf to steal the Norwegian throne out from under him again.

No one could blame young Harald for a certain amount of hero worship when it came to big brother Olaf. Both were the sons of kings. Olaf’s father, King Harald Grenski, had died before Olaf’s birth, having abandoned their mother Asta Gudbrandsdottir in pursuit of Swedish princess Sigrid the Haughty. (Living up to her name, to discourage his advances, Sigrid got Harald drunk at a great feast and, in literal overkill, had the hall burned down on top of him.) Both cheated and widowed, Asta had then married another petty king, Sigurd Halfdanarson, called Syr, and bore him two daughters and three sons, lastly Harald. But Norway, too long a profusion of petty kingdoms, was ready for unification. As the wife of two little kings, it was

Asta who raised her sons to be great kings, and to make her the mother of their country. By the time she gave birth to Harald, Olaf was already making himself ruler of all Norway.

It was said that when Harald was aged three – perhaps on the occasion of the death of his father Sigurd – Olaf came to visit the royal estate at Ringerike, on the shore of Lake Tyri near modern Oslo. Asta presented Harald and his two elder brothers, Guthorm and Halfdan, to the king. (Harald's sisters, Gunnhild and Ingerid, played little role in history.) When Olaf took the older boys on his knee, scowling in mock ire, they cast their gaze down before him. But when he did the same to Harald, the lad looked him straight in the eye, and when Olaf tugged his hair, Harald gave back in kind, tugging the king's mustache. Olaf told him, "One day, kinsman, you will be a fighter."

The next day Olaf and Asta, walking about the grounds, came upon Guthorm and Halfdan playing at farming, building pretend houses and barns for sheep and cattle. Their father King Sigurd had never been as interested in royal power as in farming. His nickname "Syr" can be translated as "Sow," as in female pig, as in one who digs in the earth and makes it fertile; it seems to have been meant, and taken, as a compliment. Little Harald was playing by himself, floating wood chips by the lakeshore, and when Olaf asked what the chips represented, Harald answered *herskips* – warships – at which the king laughed and replied, "The day may come, brother, when you captain ships."

He then asked Guthorm, "What do you desire most?"

Guthorm said, "*Akra*." Fields.

"And how large would these fields be?"

Guthorm gestured to the ness, the peninsula that protrudes south into Lake Tyri. "Every summer I would have the entire headland that goes out into the lake sown."

Even in those days, there were ten farms on that headland. The king admitted, "That would yield a great deal of grain," and turned to Halfdan. "And what do you want most?"

"*Kyr*," said Halfdan. Cattle.

"How many?"

"So many that when they went down to the lake for water, they would stand shoulder to shoulder the entire way around the shore."

"That would be a sizable herd," agreed Olaf. "You take after your father."

Then the king said to Harald, “And you? What do you want most?”

Harald said, “*Huskarla*.” Housecarls.

“And how many?”

“So many,” answered Harald, “that they would eat all my brother Halfdan’s cows in one meal.”

Laughing, Olaf told Asta, “Here, mother, you are bringing up a king.”

Now Harald learned from his big brother how a king goes to war. Olaf had brought his personal retinue of some 200 warriors from the court of his brother-in-law King Yaroslav of Kiev (Jarizleif in Old Norse). His other brother-in-law, King Onund Jacob of Sweden, had provided 400 more, and further permitted Olaf to recruit as many as he could, including numerous exiled Norwegians residing in Sweden. One expatriate noble, Dag Hringsson, brought 1,200 men-at-arms for the promise of the return of his ancestral lands in Norway. Their exact total is subject to speculation. Snorri counted them at about 2,400, but prior to the spread of Arabic numerals in the 14th century the Norse used what’s now called the “long hundred” of six score – 120 – making Snorri’s total over 2,800. That was not an overlarge army for those days, but realms had been conquered with less.

Harald and Olaf set out from Selanger on Sweden’s Baltic coast, marching 4,300 feet up and 350 miles over the mountainous backbone of Scandinavia. Hoping to draw new recruits to the cause, Olaf imbued his campaign with the air of a religious crusade and attracted perhaps a thousand additional men along the way. Many, however, were no better than mercenaries and marauders looking to war for profit, and who furthermore followed the old faith. Olaf insisted they accept Christ and baptism: “We cannot depend on numbers. We must depend on God, for only with his power and mercy shall we gain victory, and I have no use for pagan men in my army.”

More than half of the recruits refused, and Olaf, true to his word, turned them away, though probably noting their names to be included in his next purge. The rest took the attitude of the brothers Gauka-Thorir and Afra-Fasti, according to the sagas “outlaws and brigands, commanding thirty men just like them. They were taller and stronger than other men. They lacked nothing for audacity and bravery.” When Olaf inquired of their religion, they told him, “We brothers have no other belief than in ourselves, our strength and

our luck, which serves us well."

For Olaf that was not enough. He insisted they convert. "Then you may follow me and I shall reward you with wealth and titles. But if you will not, then go back to your banditry."

For his part Afra-Fasti ("Afra the Constant") replied, "I will not turn back. If I am to go into battle for one side or another, to me it matters little which."

Gauka translates as "Cuckoo," which might imply "crazy" to modern readers, but to the Norse the referral was to the European cuckoo bird, a sly imitator that slips into other species' nests to lay its eggs, leaving them to do the work of raising the chick; to ward off attack it mimics the coloration of the Eurasian sparrowhawk. From this we might take it that Gauka-Thorir was seen by his compatriots to be an opportunistic thief pretending to be a great predator. He told his brother, "If I'm to fight, then I want to help the king, for he needs it more. And if I am to believe in a god, is it worse for me to put my faith in the White Christ than in any other? Therefore I think we should have ourselves baptized, if the king thinks it so important, and then go into battle at his side."

Then there was the outlaw Arnljot of Gelline, "so tall," according to the *Morkinskinna*, "that no man stood taller than his shoulders. He was very handsome, with beautiful hair. He arrived well armed, with the finest helmet and mail coat, a scarlet shield, and an ornamented sword, and held a great gold-inlaid spear with a shaft so thick his fist could only just close on it." Olaf did not object to his outlawry, but to his religion, to which Arnljot replied that he believed in his own strength and prowess, but that he had heard of Olaf's Christ and was willing to be baptized if required to fight for the king. Olaf required it. All his men were to paint white crosses on their shields and helmets as a sign of recognition.

The army descended onto the lowlands at Stiklestad ("Stikla's Farm," after a Norwegian girl who had turned shield-maiden rather than submit to invading Danes) at the far northeastern end of the Trondelag, the Norwegian heartland. In those days Trondheim, "Throne Home," then called Nidaros, was the capital of Norway. He who held it could rightfully call himself king. Olaf was not so naive as to expect his subjects, whom he had ruled with such a heavy hand, to welcome him back with open arms. Some of his reavers had urged a campaign of scorched earth, destroying every homestead and killing every person who would not join the cause, as the king had done to

nonbelievers in the old days.

Olaf, however, maintained that treason against him was a lesser offense than treason against God. He forbade pillaging. Besides, if it came to battle and his forces lost, cattle and booty would only hamper their retreat, while in the event of victory all would be theirs anyway, and the worse for it if laid waste beforehand. So he sought agreement with the peasants, even taking aside one of the local farmers who had joined him and giving him silver, with orders to keep it hidden until after the battle and then give it to the church for the souls of the fallen in the peasant army.

By such means Olaf hoped to gain the peasants' sympathies, but the old days now came back to haunt him. As his army arrived on the high ground at Stiklestad, they looked down to behold virtually every Norwegian male able to bear a weapon – lendermen (landowners), *thegns* (retainers), cottars (tenant farmers), bondmen (serfs), peasants, yeomen, even *thralls* (slaves) – "the whole people, free and unfree," recorded Snorri, "so many that nobody in Norway at that time had seen such a large army in the field." He counts them at "a hundred times a hundred," which rather sounds like a convenient synonym for "many," but in long hundreds works out to 14,400 – over four times the size of Olaf's army.

King Knut was indeed not among them, but leading in his stead was Kalf Arnason, who Snorri admitted was "a great chieftain…a man of vision." He was a scion of the Arnasynir clan – the sons of Arni – a powerful family sundered by allegiance to two different kings. His brothers had sided with Olaf, but Kalf, the eldest, had fallen out with the king and gone over to Knut. Now he led the peasant army along with his brother-in-law Harek of Tjotta and father-in-law Thorir Hund of Bjarkoy, who nursed their own grudges against the king in matters of feud, blood money and revenge.

Old Harek had quarreled with Olaf's shire reeve – sheriff – for which the king judged against him. In reprisal, Harek had committed murder and, when it came to it, backed Knut. Kalf regarded him as "a man experienced in battle, who acts for honor alone," and even suggested he command the army, but Harek declined: "I am now an old and decrepit man, and cannot put up much of a fight. Besides, King Olaf and I were once friends, and though that does not seem to matter much to him anymore, it would be wrong for me to lead an army against him."

Thorir Hund – "the Hound" – of the Bjarkoy clan was one of the greatest

chiefs of Halogaland on Norway's northwest coast, and once loyal to the king as well. (His father Thorir had died with Olaf's father Harald in Sigrid the Haughty's pyre.) But Thorir's nephew had become involved in a blood feud in which he beheaded a foe at King Olaf's table, for which he himself was later speared through by a king's man. Thorir carried that same spear and had sworn to sink it into Olaf's body.

And one Thorstein Knarrarsmid – "knarr smith," ship builder, "stout and strong," wrote Snorri, "very ardent, and a skilled killer of men" – held against King Olaf the confiscation, over the matter of payment for a murder, of a fine trading ship he had built. He was welcomed into the forefront of Thorir Hund's ranks, from whence he hoped to get within a weapon's swing of the king. As a woodworker, Thorstein bore an axe.

"Everyone wanted Kalf to lead the army," recounted Snorri, "and to assign to each man his place." Kalf warned them that though Olaf had fewer men, the king was a great commander, and however large the peasant army, if its leaders showed fear or weakness their men would break and run, leaving the rest to throw themselves on royal mercy. "We must all be quick and unfailing," he told them, "and lead the peasants with nothing but confidence, for they will take spirit when we ready the army for battle and encourage them to fight."

Norway's bishop, the firebrand Sigurd, who had been appointed by his uncle Knut, inveighed against Olaf, reminding one and all of the many injustices the king had committed in the name of God. Kalf added, "Any man who does not fight bravely today shall be called a worthless coward, for these are not innocents opposing us. Spare none, for they will not spare you."

He ordered his flag raised in the center of the peasant army, with his and Harek's men beneath it, and Thorir Hund and his less experienced men up front where it would be difficult for them to flee through the veterans. To either side stood picked fighting men, the best the land could offer, with the rest of the vast throng on either flank. "This section of the line was wide and thick," recorded Snorri – meaning, a solid shield wall.

Harald stood by Olaf's side as the king, carrying a spear and caparisoned as befit royalty, in a hauberk of chain mail, his helmet encrusted in gold, his white shield inlaid with a gold cross, and at his belt his gold-hilted sword,

called Hneitir (“Striker”), addressed his soldiers thus: “We have many good men, and though the farmers may outnumber us, it is fate that decides victory. I swear that I will not flee from this fight, but will triumph, or die.”

He promised each man land and riches in victory or, in defeat, a greater reward in heaven. “We must attack first, and decide matters swiftly, for the numbers are against us. Only by attacking can we win. If we fight too long, with no reinforcement, their reserves will overpower us. But if we can force their front line to retreat, they will crowd into the men behind them, and the more there are, the more we will kill.”

Though the sagas do not explicitly say so, by their description it seems certain Olaf arranged his army into the Vikings’ traditional wedge formation, the *svinfylking* – the “boar snout.” According to the 12th–13th-century Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus, it was invented by Odin himself, but in reality it was probably just handed down from the *caput porcinum*, the “pig’s head” wedge of Roman days. (Some modern historians believe the *svinfylking* more resembled a column.) With the most heavily armored men in its tip, it was well designed to focus the attackers’ strength on one spot in a shield wall. And here is where the battle of Stiklestad differs from that of Fulford, thirty-six years later: In 1030 it was the invaders, not the defenders, who held the high ground. But to carry the day, they would have to abandon it, literally lowering themselves to wash their blades in the blood of peasants.

Olaf put Arnljot of Gelline, Gauka-Thorir, Afra-Fasti and their men on point. He awarded the *thegn* Thord Folason the honor of bearing his banner, white with the figure of a *wyrm*, a sea serpent, and took position under it himself with his retainers. Bjorn – “the Bear” – was the king’s *stallari*, his marshal, his chief commander, an axe-fighting Swede and an old friend of Olaf’s Swedish queen Astrid; it was he who had journeyed to Rus bearing news to Olaf that Norway lay open to reconquest. And the young heir to the Earl of Orkney, Rognvald Brusason, had followed Olaf into exile and returned with him now. “Of all men Rognvald was among the most handsome,” claims the *Orkneyinga Saga*, “with a fine head of silken blond hair. At a young age he grew tall and strong, earning great repute for his cleverness and gallantry.”

Olaf commanded his court poets to shelter with him, behind the shields around his standard: “Stay here, and remember everything, so you will not include rumors when singing songs of it later.” The king’s favorite poet,

Sigvat Thordarson, was not present at his lord's hour of need, being on a pilgrimage to Rome – as noted with some derision by lesser skalds on the scene – but he was able to speak to survivors afterward, wrote extensively about the battle and is quoted at length by Snorri.

The Swedes would take Olaf's left flank. Dag Hringsson's Norwegians were still on the approach, along the northern side of the valley. Until they rejoined, Harald's Opplanders would man the right flank. But, facing four-to-one odds in the coming battle – and knowing their mother had no other kingly sons to risk – Olaf announced, "I do not think Harald my brother should be in the battle, for he is still a youth."

This had a predictable effect on the young princeling. Harald told Olaf, "I will certainly be in this battle. I'm not too weak to handle a sword. If necessary my hand can be strapped to the hilt. No one desires more than I to give these farmers a beating. I go where my men go."

And here for the first time we see Harald the warrior poet, for he's said to have come up with a stanza on the spot:

> I will dare to defend
> My place in battle,
> According to my mother's wish.
> Let us redden our shield-rims in rage.
> This young skald will stand,
> Battle-maddened, before spears
> And the swing of swords.
> Men harden themselves in war.

Vikings loved nothing better than a man with the skill and nerve to compose verse while facing death. Young Harald got his way. And now he received his second lesson, in how a king leads his men into battle.

The armies convened at midday, but the combat did not immediately commence. The peasant host was so vast it took time for them all to arrive, with Thorir Hund shepherding his least trustworthy farmers to the fore, lest they lose heart before the fight. It would have been the perfect time for Olaf to attack, but he was still awaiting the arrival of Dag Hringsson's

Norwegians. The pause was so long that the king actually lay down and took a nap. He resented being roused by Kalf Arnason's brother Finn on the approach of the enemy, for he dreamed pleasantly that he was climbing a ladder so high that it reached to heaven, and had been mounting the top step when awakened.

Finn told him, "This dream seems less pleasant to me than it does to you."

The two armies approached so close that it was possible for men on one side to recognize those on the other. Olaf spotted his former man-at-arms, Kalf. "What are you doing here, Kalf, when we were once friends?" he called. "It looks bad for you to fight against us, or to throw a spear into our army, since four of your brothers are with us." (By tradition Norse battles began with a single spear cast into the enemy, in remembrance of the spear Odin, leading the mythical Aesir, threw into the opposing Vanir to begin the First War between the gods. As Olaf was at least nominally Christian, he and we might assume that Kalf would cast the first spear at Stiklestad.)

Kalf replied, "Things do not always go as we want. When you fled the country those of us you left behind were forced to seek peace. Though we face each other now, if I had my way we would be friends again."

But Finn, Kalf's own brother, reminded the king, "Everyone knows that Kalf says one thing, then does another."

Olaf called back, "You may want peace, Kalf, but your farmers appear to think otherwise."

A warrior named Thorgeir, from Kvistad in southern Norway, had risen high in Olaf's service, but now stood with Kalf. He shouted back at the king, "You'll get the peace you gave many of us."

Olaf sneered, "You, whom I raised to power and title from nothing, will regret our meeting, for fate has not declared victory for you today."

It was about half past one in the afternoon. The peasants had no reason to await the arrival of Dag Hringsson and his men. Thorir Hund, carrying the spear with which he had sworn to kill Olaf, and wearing no armor but a coat of reindeer hide said to have been charmed by Laplander shamans to ward off all blows, raised the war cry: "*Fram, fram, buandmenn*!" – "Forward, forward, bondmen!"

A shield wall was a defensive formation, meant to stay in place. In an advance, lest it lose integrity, it could only move one stride at a time. Slowly, rhythmically, inexorably, chanting in unison to stay in step, the ranks of

peasants and farmers and slaves started up the hill toward the *svinfylking* under the serpent banner. As the distance between them closed, arrows and crossbow bolts and then javelins began arching over the intervening ground, and men cried out as they struck home.

It was not to Olaf's advantage for his army to suffer that for long, and he would have soon raised his sword Hneitir high and given his battle cry. "*Fram, fram, Kristsmenn, krossmenn, konungsmenn*!" – "Forward, forward, Christ's men, cross men, king's men!"

On the right wing of the boar snout, young Harald raised his sword and his shield and started downhill with his men, slowly, keeping one eye on his brother's flag, careful to hold precise formation with it. But unlike a shield wall, the *svinfylking* was all about momentum. As the troops broke into a trot they would have been less concerned with precision and more with sheer impact, growing louder as every man gave vent to his fear and rage and bloodlust, now screaming at the top of his lungs, knowing that death might swoop down in the next moments upon him and, if it did, that the only thing left to him was to die well. At the last instant those champions in the very tip of the wedge – so recently outlaws, robbers and vagabonds, and now on the forefront of a king's holy crusade – would have raised their swords to get in that first clean blow, as they reached a dead run and struck the shield wall like a human battering ram….

These days, when men kill each other from ever-increasing distances, there is no modern equivalent to ancient shield-wall warfare. Few people today – mostly athletes, professional ball players and fighters – have experienced an adult man slamming into them at full speed, and none of them with an edged weapon and the determination to use it. The overriding goal in a collision of shield wall and *svinfylking* would be to survive that initial impact – how many men were simply crushed in the press, or lost their footing and were trampled, will never be known – and after that to deal with the enemy man-to-man, to the best of one's ability with a blade.

"Olaf the Stout killed many," recorded his poet Sigvat. "Pressing forward in his armor, the brave lord sought a quick victory." The great wedge cleaved the line of the peasant army like a headsman's axe through the neck of the condemned. So overwhelming was the charge that the boar's snout thrust

completely through onto the far side of the field. “The van of the king’s formation stood upon ground where the rear of the farmers’ line had stood,” wrote Snorri, “and many of the peasant army began to flee.”

The farmers’ line had been cut entirely in two. Those on either flank were so stunned by the fury of the king’s assault that some of them took up the loyalist war cry, either in confusion or in an attempt to pass themselves off as Olaf’s men. Hearing this, others among their own army turned on them, and they fell to fighting each other.

But, having weathered the initial assault, Kalf, Thorir the Hound, Harek and their men stood firm, exhorting the peasants to fight. It is possible they even intended the shield wall to part for the *svinfylking* to pass through, for the boar snout was strong in attack, but vulnerable in defense. If its initial impact did not drive the defenders from the field, they remained on both sides of the wedge, perfectly positioned to achieve the holy grail of ancient warfare: the double envelopment.

“The peasant army pushed on from both sides,” Snorri reported. “Those nearest the enemy hewed with their swords, those behind them thrust with their spears, and those in the rear shot arrows, threw javelins, or cast stones, hand-axes, or sharp stakes. Soon many men began to fall on both sides.”

Inside the wedge there was no escaping the missiles raining in from two directions, barely any elbow room to raise a shield overhead for protection and, as both sides pressed in, the goal was not just to survive the enemy but simply to survive the crush. By the sheer weight of the peasant army, both wings of Olaf’s army were pushed inward, toward the king’s serpent banner. Somehow Harald kept his feet and held off the peasants; this we know because otherwise his story would have ended on the spot. The skald Thjodolf Arnorsson, who in later years would be Harald’s great friend and favorite poet, recorded, “By Haug [a hamlet just east of Stiklestad], I heard, the lord was hard-pressed in battle, but the Burner of Bulgars fought well for his brother.”

“I stood in battle, and my wounds bled,” Harald would write years later. “I saw the farmers reinforcing their host. Their swords dealt death.”

Many men’s stories did end there. The point of the wedge, a moment ago the strongest part of Olaf’s formation, was now the weakest, with enemies just a sword’s swing to either side. The men there took terrible losses. Arnljot, Gauka-Thorir, and Afra-Fasti are said to have each slain a foeman –

in some cases two or more – but, beset like great bloody-antlered stags surrounded by a pack of wolves, all went down in the first going, and their men with them, no doubt praying with their last breaths that the White Christ would welcome their spirits to paradise fresh off a battlefield, as would have Odin.

The king ordered Thord Folason to him with his serpent flag. “Thord, I heard, fought fiercely beside Olaf, with spears,” reported Sigvat. “Bravely he held high before the Norwegian king the gold-embroidered banner.” The king, with the best and boldest of his fighters, including Rognvald and Bjorn *Stallari*, broke out beyond the safety of his shield wall where they could get at the enemy. The look on Olaf’s face is said to have struck fear into the farmers – perhaps the blood-madness of the berserker was not precluded by Christian faith. But, goaded in by the lendermen, the peasants nevertheless pressed close upon him for the kill: “Shields, men’s hands and gory swords were red with blood, where the enemy strove against the mighty king.”

Olaf came up against Thorgeir of Kvistad, who had been so eager for their meeting, and struck him full in the face. The sword Hneitir cleaved the nose-guard on Thorgeir’s helm and his skull beneath the eyes, nearly shearing off the top of his head. As he fell Olaf chided, “Did I not warn you, Thorgeir, that when we met victory would not be yours?”

But Thord Folason received a fatal thrust. He planted Olaf’s serpent banner in Norwegian soil with such force that it stood on its own, and then fell down dead beneath it. As the enemy closed from both sides Olaf and his men were near to being surrounded. In the distance Dag Hringsson’s men could be seen, coming to the rescue, but before they could join the battle there came what everyone who survived remembered as a veritable sign from God, or from the gods.

“The weather was clear, and the sun shone brightly,” wrote Snorri, “but when the battle began the sky and sun became red, and before it ended became dark as night.”

Overhead, the moon was moving in front of the sun. Modern scientists can turn back the astronomical clock to plot the exact time and path of its shadow across the earth, which reveals a great discrepancy in the story of the battle of Stiklestad. Snorri and the Norwegian monk Theodoricus, probably working

from the same sources, both stated the battle fell on the “fourth day before the kalends of August”: July 29, which is when modern Norwegians commemorate its anniversary. According to astronomers, however, the only eclipse to appear over Norway in the year 1030 was a rare “hybrid” annular/total eclipse (which, depending on the exact angle and distance of the moon from the observer, from certain vantage points appears total, and from other points as a thin ring of light). It occurred over Stiklestad a month later, on August 31.

The discrepancy has been found to arise from a mistranslation of an ancient text, which sets the date of battle as “1029 years and 209 days after Christ’s birth.” But counting the days in Nordic long hundreds (two long hundreds plus nine = 249) from December 25 works out to August 31. So Norwegians today are in all likelihood celebrating an arbitrary date, the way Americans celebrate artificially set presidents’ birthdays (and, it must be said, as the early Christian church arbitrarily set the date of Christ’s birth), but that matters less to Harald’s story than the ill fortune boded by the sky darkening over the battlefield at Stiklestad.

“For the prince,” admitted Sigvat, “a great omen appeared that day.” At Stiklestad the eclipse began around two in the afternoon, and little over an hour later the sun appeared in a dark sky as a great black hole within a thin, blazing ring of light, ninety-eight percent obscured. The battle turned into a night fight, so dark that Dag Hringsson couldn’t see to array his men as they arrived on the field. There could be no surer sign from above of momentous events. Adherents of the old gods must have felt themselves battling at Ragnarok, the final battle at the end of times, and that it was surely one-eyed Odin looking down on them. For Christians only one other such darkness at midday could be known – that one almost exactly a thousand years past, at Jerusalem – and that now, as then, a holy man’s death was at hand.

In that black confusion of blood and blades, curses and screams, Olaf met Thorir the Hound and dealt him a cut across the shoulders, but even Hneitir could not open the Hound’s reindeer-skin coat. The sagas put this down to Finnish witchcraft, but heavy stiffened leather is surprisingly effective against cuts, if not so much against the thrust. “Though the king’s sword did not cut where the reindeer skin protected him,” wrote Snorri, “still Thorir was wounded on his hand.”

Olaf called on his marshal Bjorn: “Strike this dog that iron does not cut!”

The Bear raised his axe but, rather than slice, reversed his grip and struck Thorir a hammer blow that staggered him. With his good hand, though, Thorir thrust his spear through the Swede, center-body, and as he fell cried, “This is how we slay the bear!”

And at that moment Thorstein Knarrarsmid, the vengeful shipwright, swung his axe and hacked into King Olaf’s left leg, just above the knee. Finn Arnason immediately slew Thorstein, but his vengeance was complete. Olaf sagged and fell across a large boulder on the field – to become famous as *Olavssteinen*, Olaf’s Stone – dropping his sword Hneitir and calling on God. (Unlike pagan Vikings, as a Christian Olaf did not need to die with sword in hand to reach paradise.) Thorir the Hound saw his chance and ran his spear of retribution up under Olaf’s mail coat, into his belly. It was Kalf Arnason who finished it, striking the king in the left side of the neck. Any of these wounds might have been fatal. Together, they were the death of Olaf II. “And after he fell,” lamented Snorri, “there fell nearly everyone who had advanced with him.”

Nearly all. Somewhere in that nightmare blood-spattered darkness at midday lay young Harald Sigurdsson, wounded on the field, yet alive. As the enemy pressed his men back he had inevitably ended up near Olaf’s banner, close enough to witness his brother’s death.

Olaf had been right – Harald was yet a boy, and even farmers who went raiding once a year, but for years on end, had more experience in swordplay than he. The sagas do not reveal the nature of his wound, except that it was incapacitating. Was it a cut to the leg, like the one that crippled mighty Olaf and left him within his enemies’ reach? Or a blow to the head that rattled Harald’s brain, right through his helmet? We know only that a killing blow was never struck. Whoever wounded Harald must have thought him dead, or been distracted or struck down himself in the next instant of battle.

Harald was left powerless to escape. He could only lie there in shock, receiving his third lesson – how a Viking dies – as the peasant army overran the serpent banner and the black hole in the sun looked down like the very eye of God – or was it that of one-eyed Odin? And of what was to become of Norway, and of Harald’s destiny, and of his life, none but the Fates could foretell.

III

Exile

In the battle the Tronders had more troops;
The fight we had was truly fierce.
I withdrew, young, my king fallen in battle.

Harald Sigurdsson

King Olaf died a little before mid-afternoon, and shortly afterward, like a lifted curse, the eclipse over Stiklestad began to wane. As summer sunshine lit the battlefield again, Dag Hringsson and his expatriate Norwegians hurled themselves into the fray, driving the farmers before them, killing many and cutting down one of their banners. So savage was their attack that it was remembered by those who witnessed it as *Dagshrid*, Dag's Storm.

Too late. Olaf's entire army had been outmatched. One-third of it could not hope to win the day. Kalf, Thorir Hund and Harek weathered the second assault and struck back. "Their numbers overwhelmed Dag," says the *Heimskringla*, "so he fled with the men he still had left."

The black sky at midday had struck literal fear of God into the peasants, but as it waned they forgot any reason to show mercy to the enemy, whom they considered no better than outlaws. The locals demanded that fugitives be hunted down and killed, lest they take up residence in the area and exact vengeance later. Thorir agreed to lead some 700 men in pursuit. In the long subarctic summer day, by nightfall they had followed Dag and his men as far as Sul, a village about seventeen miles up the Verdal valley, from where they had vanished into the mountains. "The king's men who had survived hid

themselves in the forests," recorded Snorri, "and some were helped by the locals."

Among them, doubtless to the consternation of those baying for his head, was Harald Sigurdsson.

In truth the Valkyries, the Choosers of the Slain, surely dipped low over the young prince that day, for wounded as he was Harald could not escape on his own. Yet the Fates had not reached the end of his life's strand. They sent him aid: Rognvald Brusason, the young heir of Orkney and boon companion of his dead brother Olaf, who found the prince on the battlefield and got him to his feet. Years later Harald's friend and skald Thjodolf heard the story from Harald himself and wrote it thus: "He left dead Olaf against his will, this princeling aged just fifteen years, hiding his face."

In the confused half-light of Dag's Storm, two youths staggering off the field attracted little notice from warriors struggling for their own lives. At the battle's edge they gathered a handful of men and decided on a plan. With Harald slowing them down, if they followed the fugitives on the run they would soon fall behind, and in any case the wise move was to avoid traveling with those being pursued, and get away on their own. But where?

"Rognvald Brusason led Harald off the battlefield," reports the *Morkinskinna*, "and that night took him to a peasant who lived in a forest, far from other people." Today the Verdal valley, due to the spread of modern agriculture as much as the nature of the terrain, is sparsley wooded. The nearest forest to Stiklestad is about a mile to the northeast, on the southern shore of the nearby lake, but the local villages still number fewer than a thousand people. A millennium ago, the area was probably more heavily forested, even less populated, and all but wild, haunted by wolves and bears.

Hiding themselves among the trees, putting as much distance as they could between themselves and the battlefield, by luck, or prior knowledge, or simply by following the smell of smoke, the fugitives came upon a woodsman's lodge. In those days numerous trades required, or were made easier and cheaper by, proximity to a steady supply of firewood: metalworker, glassmaker, charcoal maker, wheelwright and carter, bowyer, fletcher and cooper (barrel maker). What such a tradesman might think of men suddenly appearing out of the forest, one wounded, all on the run, likely depended on what they paid him to think. Two young Norwegian noblemen would not be short of valuable jewelry, let alone coin.

“The peasant took Harald in, and kept him hidden,” says the *Heimskringla*, “and Harald was cared for until he was well.” If a bone was broken, it was set. A stab or cut was washed with wine or vinegar, cauterized with red-hot steel, and soothed with ointment of honey or egg white. Yet Harald could travel no further, and with the enemy likely combing the woods for them, there was no point in both he and Rognvald being captured (though for a wealthy young lord capture did not necessarily mean death or even poor treatment, but life as a hostage until ransomed). The heir to Orkney went on ahead with their men, east over the mountains toward Sweden, and the young princeling went under cover as a commoner.

Instead of a royal hall, he lived in a one-room peasant longhouse. Instead of a mattress of down or straw, he slept on a rough bench, or a floor of beaten earth. Instead of suckling pig on a platter, he ate porridge and stew, boiled for days on end. Instead of wine, he drank ale, maybe mead. And, if Harald lowered himself to it (the sagas do not say; he probably would not have admitted it if he had), there was work: at that time of year, root crops, cabbages and onions to be harvested, wood to be chopped and split before winter and, when the weather had cooled enough to keep down the flies, animals to slaughter and butcher. By September Norway’s salmon, sea-trout and Arctic char are winding down their freshwater runs, and there would be fish to rack for drying in the wind and sun. The Verdal is known even today for its elk (more akin to the North American moose than the wapiti), and as summer turned to autumn the rut-minded bulls would have been relatively easy prey for a hunter concealed with bow or spear.

But a man healthy enough for heavy labor or hunting is healthy enough for travel. The longer Harald tarried, the greater the risk to his host, and of running into winter at the top of the mountains. As soon as he was fit, the peasant offered his son to guide the prince through the high passes. The boy later recalled Harald’s red cloak. “He covered his head with a hood, so that I could not see his face. My father told me to escort him until he sent me back.”

The two lads set off on horseback. “The peasant’s son led him east over the divide, sticking to the forest trails, staying off the roads,” recounted Snorri. “The peasant’s son did not know who he was guiding.”

From conquering hero to outlaw on the run, Harald was at a low point in his life. But as the peasant’s son recalled, the young prince kept his chin up,

turning in the saddle to remark with a laugh, “Here I am, slinking from forest to forest with little honor. Who knows if I’ll gain fame far and wide in the end?”

“He went east over the mountains through Jamtaland and Helsingjaland,” relates the *Heimskringla*. Today Jamtland is part of Sweden. Back then it was only barely part of Norway – a wild, ungoverned region owing allegiance to no king. Not even Christianity had reached the Jamts, a remote hill tribe living by their own laws. (Arnljot Gelline had been a Jamt.) Their forests were infamous for robbers dressing as women or monks to lure unwary travelers off the road to their doom, but the boys made it down out of the mountains to the lowlands of what is now Halsingland on Sweden’s Baltic coast. That, however, was not much different than Jamtland, except the people spoke Old East Norse instead of Old West Norse. Instead of robbers, its woods were said to be full of giants and trolls. One famous (and timeless) story claims the devil, dressed as a musician, entranced village youngsters to dance themselves to death. Helsingjaland was one of the last regions of Sweden to adopt Christianity and swear fealty to kings.

“Then,” recalled the peasant’s son, “we rendezvoused with those same men who had come to my father’s house.”

This was in Svithjod, modern Svealand, the original Sweden. “There he [Harald] met Rognvald Brusason,” recorded Snorri, “and many of King Olaf’s men who had fled the battle at Stiklestad.”

As the peasant’s son told it, “They hailed the man in the red cape with the name Harald. He was a strong man, fair-skinned, imposing, with thick eyebrows and a quite fierce expression. He gave me a knife and belt, and I went back to my father’s lodge.”

Now accompanied by Rognvald and their men, Harald made for Sigtuna, near today’s Stockholm, the royal seat founded in the year 980. King Onund’s half-sister Astrid, Olaf’s wife, had followed her husband out of his exile in Rus but remained behind in Svithjod with their daughter Ulfhild when he went home for the last time. In years to come she would prove of gracious help to his heirs. Of Onund himself, Adam of Bremen wrote about four decades later, “Certainly he was youthful, but he surpassed all his ancestors in good sense and devotion. No king was so beloved by the Swedes

as Onund.”

Onund was wise to keep it that way. His father Olaf Skautkonung had been forced by his own people to relinquish power for, among other things (*skautkonung* translates as “tax king”), trying to impose Christianity upon them. As the second Christian king of the Swedes, on assuming full power after his father’s death Onund had not made the same mistake, and as a result Svithjod remained steeped in paganism. The religious capital at nearby Gamla Uppsala – Old Uppsala, about three miles north of the modern city – was revered even then for the burial mounds of kings and, as some said, the gods themselves.[1] According to Adam of Bremen its temple, with idols of Thor, Odin and Freyr, was decorated in gold, but its splendor was marred by the fact that the Swedes drowned human sacrifices in a well outside. Every nine years, around the time of the spring equinox, they held a festival at which they killed nine males from each of various species, including humans, and strung up the bodies in a nearby grove. “Even dogs and horses hang there aside men,” Adam had heard. “A Christian told me that he had seen seventy-two bodies hung in dedication.”

A people with little use for Christianity – particularly among their rulers – not afraid to rise up in revolt, and requiring male victims for human sacrifice? Despite the inclinations of its king, Sweden could not have been a very attractive new home for young Harald. In fact, there was no longer anything left for him in Scandinavia. That same year, 1030, his mother Asta passed away, possibly from grief on hearing her eldest son Olaf had died and her youngest son was exiled.

No coincidence, then, that Harald took his leave as soon as winter ended. “The spring after,” wrote Snorri, “Harald and Rognvald acquired ships, and that summer went east to Russia [Rus] and King Yaroslav.”

That one sentence makes it sound easy – Snorri has a knack for that – but it encompasses a journey of some 1,300 miles at an 11th-century pace of a few miles per hour. It bears on young Harald’s life as likely his first trip out of the wild, barbarian North, but for all that Russia in those days was practically part of Scandinavia.

When the Vikings had come boiling out of their fjords in the late 8th century, it was only natural that the Norwegians and Danes looked west

to England and Ireland and south to France, but the Swedes looked east, across the Baltic. Over the span of 200 years they had colonized, conquered and subjected the local Slavs into a nascent Viking kingdom. (*Slava* means "glory" or "honor" in their original tongue; by the time the Swedes were done with the word, and the locals, it would mean something totally different.) A century before Harald got there, Persian explorer and geographer Ahmad ibn Rustah had already written of the Norse in Rus:

> They harry the Slavs by ship and carry them off as slaves…. They tend no fields, but live only on what they take from the Slavs…. When a son is born, his father will go to him sword in hand, and, throwing it down, tell him, "I will leave you no property. You will have only what you can take with this weapon."

When the ships bearing Harald, Rognvald and their men entered the narrowing Gulf of Finland in the spring of 1031, they could look out over the starboard gunwale to the southern coastline, where everything – modern Estonia and Russia – had just the year before been the land of the Chudes, a race of Finnish fur traders and mercenaries. While King Olaf had been mounting his unsuccessful assault on Norway, his brother-in-law Prince Yaroslav of Kiev had mounted a successful conquest of the Chudes and taken their premier city, at Tartu on the Emajogi River. Russian folk songs still lament Chude women drowning themselves and their children to escape defilement and enslavement. Pitiless, Yaroslav built a fortress on the site and renamed it Yuryev (Yuri's, from his baptismal name) as an outpost of his growing empire.

From the Gulf, Harald's crews stowed sails and broke out oars for the run up the Neva River – only forty-five miles long, but Europe's fourth-largest river by volume – past the future site of St. Petersburg/Leningrad, on to Lake Ladoga. At the mouth of the Volkhov River, they came to Aldiegjuborg (modern Staraya Ladoga), today not much more than a rural village, but then a bustling trading town protected by a limestone fortress. Here northern fighting men turned south in pursuit of Mediterranean gold, and Vikings became Varangians – a Greek corruption of the Old Norse *vaeringi*, literally sworn companion but effectively paid soldier, mercenary – swords serving the highest bidder, yet also rough-hewn conquerors suddenly assuming the responsibility of government.

Ladoga was the perfect example of Norsemen come as masters but tamed in the service of Slavic subjects. Said to have been founded (but more likely

simply taken over) by Rurik, the semi-legendary Danish Viking and father of the tsars, the town had been Eastern Europe's greatest merchant center and Rus's first capital until sacked and burned by the Norwegians in 980. It never fully recovered, but nor was it ever again fully Norse. When Rurik's descendant Yaroslav married King Onund's sister Ingigerd in 1019, he gifted the town to her as part of her dowry. She had called upon her father's cousin, the Swedish earl Rognvald Ulfsson, to rule it for her, but he had recently died and the earldom had passed to his son, Eilif. The young earl made welcome his visitors from the west. He and Harald had likely never met, but Rognvald Brusason had traveled through Ladoga the previous year, bound for Norway with Olaf. Theirs was merely a temporary stopover on their way south, up (on the map, down) the Volkhov, the only river that flows north rather than south out of the Russian heartland.

Today a hydroelectric dam fifteen miles upstream regulates flow, but a thousand years ago the river mouth was full of rapids. Cargo boats, smaller but with larger crews to man the oars, were beached, unloaded and portaged around the obstacles, or poled along the shoreline with men or horses hauling on ropes upon the bank. They passed the burial mounds along the shore that still exist and are said to be the graves of Rurik himself and his successor, Oleg. Harald would also have observed, at intervals on the riverside crags, the series of fortifications controlling passage upstream. Vikings might have burned Ladoga, but none went further except by permission of Prince Yaroslav. It was the chain of fortresses and their surrounding settlements that led the Norse to name the land *Gardariki*, Kingdom of Cities.

A hundred and twenty-five miles upriver, Harald, Rognvald and Eilif came to Holmgard, Island City, called by the Slavs Novgorod, New City. It had been the Novgorodians who had repelled Rurik's Vikings, but fell to fighting among themselves to the point they invited the Norse back to reign over them, launching a dynasty that would last three-quarters of a millennium. The combination of Varangian rulers and Slavic subjects created, in effect, a new people: the Rus. (Many theories abound on the origin of the name, most rooted in the Finnish term for Sweden, *Ruotsi*.) Long before Harald got there, the Vikings had been gentled, somewhat at least, by their self-imposed duty to their subjects. Of them ibn Rustah wrote, "The men ornament themselves with armlets and gold. They treat their slaves well and wear exquisite clothes, because they are great traders. They have many towns. They take a very

friendly attitude towards any foreigners and strangers seeking refuge."

Novgorod had flourished under the new regime. Much of the surrounding terrain was swampland, peat bog or lake-pocked marsh, lacking stone for building but thickly forested in spruce, oak, pine and birch. So the city was built of wood; even its streets were paved with wood. In those days its *kremlin*, the castle, had not yet been built, but an oaken cathedral already stood on the site of the modern Cathedral of St. Sophia, a former pagan cemetery. The deeper one traveled into Kievan Rus, the more deeply one felt the Christian God's grip on the land and its people.

Snorri and the *Orkneyinga Saga* both claim Harald, Rognvald and Eilif met Yaroslav in Novgorod, Yaroslav's original seat of power. However, according to the *Povesti Vremeninyxu Letu*, the *Tale of Bygone Years*, a timeline of events compiled less than a century later by the Rus monk St. Nestor, the prince had long since (1017) moved his base of operations to "his city" of Kiev. From one to the other was another 700 miles, across Lake Ilmen, rowing or sailing up three or four rivers, coasting down three or four more, portaging between them to finally reach the Dnieper. These southern portages were the most dangerous part of the journey. Dragging their ship slowly along the riverbank, weighed down with goods and gear, travelers risked attack by bandits and marauders riding in off the eastern steppes, until they finally arrived at Kiev.

The "City of Kyi," named for its semi-legendary 6th-century founder, had grown up around a fortress on an imposing set of bluffs rising over 300 feet above the main river route between the Mediterranean and Scandinavia. To the Norse it was *Koenugard*, which, among other translations, might be a corruption of the Finnish for "city of the water route". Trade plied up and down the river in dugout boats, which the Slavs called *lodze* and the Greeks *monoxylai*, each hewn from a single oak or linden tree and bearing thirty to forty passengers. Iron, copper and lead, lumber, furs, beeswax and honey, walrus ivory, Baltic amber and – of course – slaves and fighting men arrived from the north. Grain, wine, oil, spices and perfumes, jewelry, glass, raw silk and linen, brocade and cloth-of-gold, religious icons, ceramics and books flowed up from the south. Gold and especially silver (the preferred currency, less valuable but more convenient in small transactions) traveled both ways. And, in the middle, Kiev had become rich. In the 11th century its population was almost 50,000, comparable to that of Paris and many times that of

London.

Arriving on the riverbank, Harald and Rognvald disembarked in Podol, the lower city on the riverside floodplain at the foot of the hill. They wound their way between little one-story, thatch-roofed wooden houses of fishermen, farmers and craftsmen, among crowds of Finns and Slavs, Greeks, Arabs and Turks, Scandinavians and Magyars in baggy trousers, tasseled hats and wool caftans trimmed in silk. The path led through the quarters of artisans and traders to this day named for tar workers, potters and leather-crafters, up around the slope of *Starokievsky Holm*, Old Kiev Hill, to the original city.

Its earthen ramparts, up to fifty feet high, a hundred feet through the base and topped by palisades of whitewashed oak, ran a little over two miles around a rough triangle enclosing some 250 acres, dominated by three main entrances: the *Ladski* (Polish) Gate on modern Independence Square, the *Zhydivski* (Jewish) Gate on modern Lviv Square, and the main entrance, the Southern Gate.

Yaroslav, inspired by the Golden Gate of Constantinople, had rebuilt this into his own imposing *Zoloti Vorota*, Golden Gate, forty feet high and twenty feet wide. With it he gave notice that Kievan Rus aspired to become a northern Byzantium, and presented its most impressive, imposing face to arriving dignitaries, returning armies and their prisoners, princes of the Church, and royal exiles from Scandinavia like Harald and Rognvald.

Through heavy oaken doors gleaming with gilt copper, they crossed an entryway under scrutiny from an observation deck, and if they wished could give thanks for safe arrival just inside, in the gate's own small church, topped by a gilded dome. Once through into the inner city, the way to the palace led past the magnificent St. Sophia's Cathedral – still a work-in-progress after twenty years of construction – the homes of the city's religious and secular leaders, and lodging for important visitors until their admittance into the Detinets, the citadel atop the hill.

This was the inner sanctum of the ruling elite of Kievan Rus, with its own walls and gates, its own churches and cloisters. Yaroslav's palace, situated in the southern corner, looked down on the river. A century earlier the Arab explorer, geographer and writer Ahmad ibn Fadlan, journeying among the Rus, probably never reached the Kievan capital but heard rumors – perhaps wild rumors – of its people, as he wrote:

> One of the customs of the Russian king is that he has with him in his palace four hundred of his most valiant and trusted men. When he dies, they die, killed for his sake…. These four hundred sit under his throne, which is large and studded with precious stones. Forty slave girls, who are his bedmates, sit by him on his throne. He may copulate with one of them in the presence of his men. He never comes down from the throne. Whenever he wants to answer the call of nature, he does it in a basin. When he wishes to ride they bring his horse to the throne, and he mounts it from there. When he is done he rides the horse to the throne so that he dismounts onto it.

Whether Yaroslav maintained such customs, if they ever existed, at this stage in his life and his rule he certainly could do whatever he pleased. The Norse called him Yaroslav the Lame (according to examination of his skeleton in the 1920s, due to an arrow wound), but the Kievans called him Yaroslav the Great. In 1031 he was in his early fifties, a younger son of the libidinous, prolific Grand Prince Vladimir – if some proud Russian sources are to be believed, by Grand Princess Anna of Byzantium – who had risen out of sixteen years of fratricidal civil war and over the bodies of a dozen dead brothers to attain the title of prince. He still had to contend with one last brother, Mstislav of Chernigov, whom he had fought to a standstill, and to whom he had ceded all Kievan territory east of the Dneiper. As a duumvirate they ruled a European state second in size only to the Byzantine Empire, reaching from the Baltic south to the Black Sea, and from the Crimea west to Poland.

Rognvald needed little introduction to the court, with whom he was familiar from his time in exile with Olaf. He or Eilif would have introduced Harald as the dead king's brother, and therefore distant kinsman of Prince Yaroslav. Kiev was in fact full of Harald's kinsmen. Yaroslav's wife Queen Ingigerd had been Olaf's sister-in-law.

Also at court was Olaf's seven-year-old bastard son Magnus and his mother, Alfhild. She had once been Olaf's slave, but had become his *frilla*, his *elja* – his concubine. Snorri described her as a notably good-looking girl of fine family, and she had certainly captured the king's eye. But she had delivered their son prematurely, and with such difficulty that it had been feared both would die. Olaf's skald Sigvat, hesitant to leave their side even long enough to notify the sleeping king lest the baby die unbaptized in the meantime, had taken it upon himself to give him the very un-Norwegian name Magnus, after Olaf's role model: Emperor Karl Magnus, Charlemagne. Informed of his fatherhood the next morning, Olaf remarked to Sigvat, "It is fascinating how sometimes luck aids foolish men, and that foolish advice

turns out lucky."

For all that, Magnus had turned into a promising young prince, even if circumstances now rendered his accession unlikely. Like Rognvald and Queen Astrid, Alfhild and Magnus had followed Olaf into exile. Unlike them, they had not followed him back on his return, but had been left behind in Kiev. Alfhild, a slave no longer, was instead mother to a royal heir, and it was not out of the question that she might yet be mother to a king. As the dead king's bastard, the boy's right to the Norwegian throne was questionable, but as Olaf's half-brother, Harald's was even more contentious. At any rate the question was moot. Thanks to Kalf Arnason and his traitorous peasants, the King of Norway was Svein, Knut's son, who sat secure on the throne on behalf of his father, the emperor in England.

But there was already another female factor at play here, though she was so young that she probably did not realize it herself: Elisaveta, daughter of Yaroslav and Ingigerd. She was only about six, a year or so younger even than her cousin and royal playmate Magnus. If Harald even noticed the little girl at court (in the manner of Kievan royalty, she would have been dressed as a small adult, swaddled up to the neck in an ornate dalmatic of brocade, taffeta and velvet, weighed down with embroidered pearls and precious stones, a costume completely impractical and of interest to a soldier only as booty), he would have considered her a mere child, polite to her only out of courtesy to her father. And if Elisaveta thought anything of the tall blond youth from the hinterlands (a fugitive from his own country, knowing little of the Slavic tongue, practically a barbarian despite his supposed noble birth), her opinion mattered not enough to be written down. Yet the schemers and machinators and gossips of the court were doubtless already pairing her and her three sisters with Harald and Magnus, speculating on various outcomes.

Harald was not without power in this. He had at his back those shiploads of fighting men who had followed him from Norway… or did he? Who would the Varangians obey now – dead Olaf's bastard, or his teenaged half-brother?

The answer, for the time being at least, was that they would *all* obey the Prince of Kiev. Snorri simply noted, "Yaroslav gave Harald and Rognvald a friendly reception."

And no wonder. The Grand Prince needed all the warriors he could get. Kiev was surrounded by enemies, but with Eilif, Rognvald and Harald behind him, Yaroslav was ready to take the fight to them.

NOTE

1 In 2019 excavations at Gamla Uppsala uncovered a spectacular Viking-era boat grave, including the remains of a horse, a dog and a warrior with a sword, spear and shield, thought surely to be a person of high rank.

IV

KIEVAN RUS

Prince, the sword's edge you sharpened
When you finished warring.
To the raven you gave raw flesh.
Wolves howled in the hills.
But warrior, I've not heard
Of a warmonger such as you,
The next year in the east,
Merciless, in the Rus.

Bolverk Arnorsson

While Yaroslav had been up north conquering the Chudes the previous summer, to the west, St. Nestor recorded, "there was a revolt in the Polish lands. The people rose up and slew the bishops, the priests, and the boyars, and many rebelled."

The pagan Poles hadn't taken as docilely as the Rus to Christianity. King Mieszko II, "The Lazy," was unable to keep them subdued. And since the new monotheism, there as elsewhere, had been employed in part to consolidate the power of government, the peasants vented their anger on their religious and feudal overlords alike. Poland was sinking into chaos which would grip it for the next ten years.

Yaroslav had an old score to settle with the Poles. In 1018 they had conquered the land of the Cherven Towns, modern Red Ruthenia, then an independent borderland that had long served as a buffer zone between Poland

and Kiev. Beyond that, they had laid siege to Kiev itself and razed it. Yaroslav had escaped to Novgorod with just four men, looking forward to little more than a life in exile overseas. The Novgorodians, however, burned his ship to prevent this, persuaded him to fight, and raised money to hire a Varangian army. With them he had forced the Poles to abandon Kiev, but they had retained the Cherven Towns.

Now Yaroslav, taking advantage of the turmoil, would exact vengeance. For that he needed a fresh supply of Varangians. The arrival of Harald, Rognvald, Eilif and their men couldn't have been better timed. "Yaroslav and Mstislav gathered a large army," wrote St. Nestor of the year 1031, "and marched into Poland."

The fortified heart of the Cherven Towns was Cherven itself, present-day Czermno, Poland, on the Bug River, the modern border with Ukraine. Today, drained and farmed, the area is a fertile plain, but a thousand years ago it was a fetid, soggy marsh only just being brought under the plow. With the Bug then navigable to it, the settlement served as a stop, or a choke point on the trade route from the Holy Roman Empire to Kiev. To protect it, or control it, a fortress rose above the marsh, with moats dug to exploit the natural water fill and provide earth for a ten-foot embankment which still stands, roughly tri-oval in shape, back then topped with a timber stockade and guard towers, accessible only via log-paved causeways and bridges through the swamp. Shielded by the moats and soft ground, Cherven could only be approached at narrow, well-defended points, and given the waterlogged soil its walls could not be undermined.

Harald was about to learn a whole new kind of warfare. Siege works were known to the Vikings – they had employed towers in their attack on Paris in 885–886, which failed – but heavy catapults, ballistas and trebuchets were antithetical to their typical stratagem of raids and rapid movement. The Rus were of the same mind. Catapults were unknown in steppe warfare before the middle of the 12th century, because the Kievans preferred to take fortifications by surprise, storming inside before the gates could be shut. Failing that, they settled in for *obleznahie*, a blockade. Slow, deliberate starvation of defenders taught the virtues of patience to an eager teenaged Viking, for Harald would have witnessed its success. "They retook the Cherven Towns," wrote St. Nestor of Yaroslav and Mstislav, "and laid waste the Polish lands."

In this Harald began to make a name for himself. In his day ibn Fadlan had written of the Rus ruler, “He has a viceroy who leads his armies, attacks his enemies, and stands for him among his people.” For this role Yaroslav chose both Harald and Eilif of Ladoga. At their age the young leaders would have served as figureheads, acting on the advice and counsel of their generals and veterans, but for all that they personified Kievan Rus in its conquest, using the Norse *svinfylking* to good effect on the Easterners. “The two leaders fought side by side,” wrote Thjodolf, “their troops in a fighting wedge. They drove the Slavs to defeat and showed the Poles little mercy.”

Mieszko fled the country. Yaroslav installed the Polish king’s older half-brother Bezprym as a puppet on the Polish throne. According to St. Nestor, Yaroslav and Mstislav “also captured many Poles and relocated them as colonists to faraway lands. Yaroslav settled his prisoners along the Ros.”

The Ros River, entering the Dnieper about sixty miles south of Kiev, had formed a natural barrier to the successive waves of fierce nomadic horsemen – Scythians, Sarmatians, Huns, Avars, Khazars – that for millennia had washed over the forest peoples of the west. Ever noted for cruelty (instead of horses or oxen, the 6th-century Avars yoked women to their wagons), they all lived in the saddle and practiced no politics more complicated than fighting with, or for, their neighbors. For two centuries the latest of these tribes, the Pechenegs, had alternated between warfare and alliance with Kiev, often at the whim of the Byzantines, who sought to play one against the other. Around the year 950 Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus had written, “It is ever to the great advantage of the Roman emperor to maintain the peace with the Pecheneg nation and to make agreements and treaties of fellowship with them…. The Pechenegs are neighbors of, and march with, the Rus, but often when the two are not at peace with one another, raid the Rus, and do them much harm.”

In 968 the Pechenegs had laid siege to Kiev; two years later they allied with the Kievan prince, Yaroslav’s grandfather Sviatoslav I, against the Byzantines; in 972 they switched sides again, slew him, and as Nestor tells us, “The nomads took his head, made a cup out of his skull and, overlaying it with gold, drank from it.” In 1019 they had allied with Yaroslav’s elder brother Sviatopolk I (“the Accursed”) against Yaroslav, but he had defeated them at the Alta River, securing his position as Prince of Kiev. Yet still they lurked to the south and east.

By forced relocation of his Polish captives along the Ros, Yaroslav gained a labor force – and human shields – for his first line of defense against the Pechenegs: the *Zmievy Valy*, the Snake Ramparts. A network of wooden walls and forts over 600 miles long, their remains still wind across the entire Ukraine the way the Great Wall spans China or Hadrian's Wall bisects England. These ramparts comprised deep ditches fronting steep embankments, topped with wooden palisades and dotted with fortresses. As nomadic horse archers, the Pechenegs were neither equipped nor tactically inclined to assault such fortifications. Whenever they tried, the walls were more than enough to hold them until the garrison of the nearest fortress arrived to drive them off.

So young Harald learned another kind of warfare: how to deal with enemy cavalry. Norsemen, raised between steep cliffs and narrow fjords, had little use for horses in battle, but the flat steppes of the East favored thundering herds of riders. Masters of the bow, wearing little in the way of armor, the Pechenegs preferred not to come to grips in battle but instead to stand off and blacken the sky with arrows, or at most come only close enough to hurl javelins. If the foe was stung into an advance to close the distance, the nomads retreated, often feigning it so their flanks could swing around and complete an envelopment. The horse archers would ride rings around the enemy, keeping up that steady rain of arrows, until enough defenders had died that finally the screaming, saber-slashing heavy cavalry could sweep in to finish off the survivors.

But Kievan foot archers – bearing bigger, heavier longbows and crossbows than mounted horsemen could wield, and themselves a smaller target, often protected by shield bearers or spearmen – could hold off enemy cavalry and slaughter them from a safe distance. The Rus, who started out as shipborne infantry, hired mercenary riders from the steppe tribes, learned from them, and over a century developed their own cavalry. Kievan infantry accessed the vast expanse of the steppe country by boat via the maze of rivers winding across it, with their horsemen screening them from the bank. In defense their Scandinavian-style shield walls were set aside in favor of wagons employed as field fortifications in the nomadic fashion.

Warfare taught Harald other lessons as well: how not only to survive, but how to prosper. The contemporary Persian writer Abu Sa'id Gardezi wrote the Pechenegs "are wealthy and have many animals and sheep and vessels of

gold and silver." There would have been opportunity aplenty for a victor over them, especially a man in position of command, to acquire gold, silver, livestock and slaves. Women.

According to the Andalusian-Arab geographer and historian Abu al-Bakri, Pecheneg prisoners of war were permitted to return home, or even to marry and become part of the tribe. The Rus were not so magnanimous. Ibn Fadlan recorded their treatment of slave girls:

> They keep beautiful maidens who are to be sold as slaves, and they may copulate with their choice of girl while their comrades look on. At times when a crowd of them is together, one might do this in full view of the others. It also happens that a merchant, who comes to buy a girl from one of them, may find him in the very act of copulating with her, and he [the Rus] will not let her be until he has had his way.

Whether Rus handling of prisoners, and women, had improved in the hundred years since that observation is doubtful. Theirs was a hard world, a man's world. Harald, however, excelled in it. As the years passed, the boy who had ridden, alone and exiled, out of Norway became once again a lord riding at the head of an army. Years later his skald Thjodolf would write, "Yaroslav saw how the king [Harald, though at that point he had not yet earned the title] was developing. The fame of the holy king's [Olaf's] brother grew."

It was not for teenaged Harald to prove himself against hardened, veteran champions in man-to-man combat. It was for him to prove himself a leader that such men would follow. This he accomplished to the satisfaction of Yaroslav the Great. Thjodolf recorded, "Harald became the commander of the king's officers."

Three years after his arrival in Kiev, and still only eighteen years old, Harald Sigurdsson stood in command of his prince's *druzhina*, his housecarls. Life was good. Ibn Fadlan, who seems to have had quite the fascination with foreign sexual mores, had written of the *druzhinniki*, "Each has a slave girl to serve him, wash him, and prepare his food and drink. He has another slave girl with whom he has sex."

Yet Harald aspired to more. He was the son of a king, and a kingdom still awaited him. He had the loyalty of men, and the wealth to hire more. He even had a potential queen: Elisaveta. She was now eight or nine years old, but Norse girls married between the ages of twelve and fifteen, and wedding arrangements were made for them long beforehand. (Elisaveta's sister Anastasia, two years older, was already betrothed to another exiled royal,

Andrew of Hungary, who would become King Andrew I.) Any lesser women in Harald's life before then counted for nothing; a union of the Norwegian and Kievan thrones would create an empire to rival Byzantium and dominate any other in Europe.

But Harald was not on the Norwegian throne, and his path to it had just become more unlikely. Events at home had overtaken him.

King Svein, Knut's son, and his mother, the queen regent Alfifa, had not proven such good rulers of Norway as Knut had promised. In matters of dispute, they favored Danes ten to one over Norwegians. Rights and inheritance were restricted, on penalty of forfeiture of all property. Forced labor, compulsory military service, and exorbitant taxes were the new norm. Svein being only about fifteen years old when he assumed the throne, Snorri tells us, "His mother Alfifa held the power, and the people of the land became her great enemies, both then and since." Norwegians remember this period as "Alfifa's time," as in the poet Sigvat's account: "The young man will long remember Alfifa's time, when at home they ate cattle feed, and like goats, ate husks."

Once again Norway stirred toward rebellion. Snorri wrote, "Those who had not fought against King Olaf said, 'Now take your just reward and treatment from Knut's people, you men of the Trondelag who fought against King Olaf and wrested away his kingdom. You were promised peace and honor, but have gotten nothing but tyranny and slavery for your treason and misdeeds.'"

Matters were exacerbated by a cult of Olaf that had sprung up after his death. Thorir Hund, for one, recounted that after the battle of Stiklestad he had seen to the king's remains. To him Olaf appeared still alive, simply asleep. He straightened the body and draped a cloak over it. (A Swedish warrior had made off with Olaf's sword Hneitir.) In the process he got royal blood on the hand wound the king had dealt him. Thorir swore it healed without treatment. It would be the first of many miraculous incidents associated with the dead king. "Thorir himself testified to this when King Olaf's holiness was reputed among the people," recorded Snorri, "and Thorir Hund was among the first of the king's powerful foes who set out to spread word of Olaf's sanctity." Apparently regretting his role in the king's death, Thorir is said to have departed for the Holy Land, never to return.

Sympathetic peasants had spirited the king's body away into hiding, but that did not stop miracles from being attributed to it. Farmers began praying to Olaf and calling on his spirit in their hour of need. To put the rumors to rest, a year after his death Svein gave permission for the body to be exhumed – a mistake on his part, for not only was it claimed to be in perfect condition, but it was reinterred behind the high altar of Nidaros Cathedral, which was built around it. Bishop Sigurd, who had roused the peasants against Olaf at Stiklestad, was forced to leave the country. His replacement, Bishop Grimkel, recognized Olaf as a saint, and the dead king became a martyr and an icon for a new Norwegian independence movement.

One of its leaders was none other than Kalf Arnason, who like Thorir Hund had come to regret siding with Knut, though for less moralistic reasons, as Snorri wrote:

> All of King Knut's oaths to Kalf had been broken, for he had sworn to name him *jarl*, the highest position in Norway, and although Kalf had led the battle against King Olaf, and had taken from him his life and realm, he had not reaped any reward for it. Feeling he had been tricked, he sent messages to his brothers Finn, Thorberg, and Arni, and they renewed their family ties.

Over the summer of 1034 Kalf led a delegation along Harald's route from Norway, through Sweden, to Kievan Rus. According to the *Heimskringla*, "They offered to escort Magnus, the son of King Olaf the Saint, back to Norway, and help him reassert his father's legacy and become king over the land."

Conspicuously absent from these plans was Harald Sigurdsson. Kalf, having changed sides twice already, had come seeking the younger, more easily manipulated candidate for king, not the proven leader of men with a grudge against him. Unlike little Magnus, Harald had been eyewitness to Kalf's treachery. Blood vengeance was the very basis of the Norse legal system, such as it was, but any impulse Harald had toward immediate retaliation on his brother's behalf would have been restrained by Yaroslav, for whom Kalf was a foreign diplomat and ally. Magnus had almost as little say in the matter. His mother, the former slave girl Alfhild, must have jumped at the chance to put her son on a throne. She sided with Kalf. So Harald had to stand by and watch as his dead brother's country, kingdom and throne – Harald's country, kingdom and throne – were bargained away.

And with whom did Elisaveta side? Whatever the little princess felt for Harald and Magnus mattered so little, in accordance with patriarchal Rus

society, that it has gone unrecorded. By this time, however, Harald had recognized the young girl as a potential future wife and, according to the *Morkinskinna*, went to Yaroslav and Ingigerd to make his case before Alfhild could do the same for Magnus: “Harald asked for Elisaveta’s hand in marriage, saying that they might recall his distinguished ancestry and knew firsthand of his own prowess.”

Yaroslav replied, “This is a fair proposal, and seems to me in many ways a good match. It is quite probable that your fame will continue to grow, but right now you have not the means to support such a highborn lady, for at the moment you are landless.”

However, Queen Ingigerd, sister to Olaf’s queen Astrid (who had remained in their family’s court in Sweden, probably with her daughter Ulfhild), would naturally have taken her sister’s low view of his former slave and concubine Alfhild, and likely used a wife’s influence on her husband Yaroslav. He told Harald, “Because I expect you will eventually achieve greatness, I will not reject you forever.”

So Elisaveta was not promised to Harald, but neither was she promised to Magnus. Regardless, Harald was on his own. To go against Kalf was to go against Magnus. And Yaroslav. And Norway. But to go with them, back home, meant swearing fealty to Magnus (for if the boy did not demand it, Kalf and Alfhild surely would), having to live alongside his brother’s killer, and giving up all dreams of the Norwegian throne that did not involve treason.

Nor was there much left for Harald in Kiev. He’d risen as far as he could, short of the throne itself. He could spend his life in Yaroslav’s service and never be more than a glorified bodyguard. Or he could seek his destiny elsewhere.

“After this conversation,” says the *Morkinskinna* of Yaroslav’s rejection, “Harald decided to go abroad.”

But where?

V

MIKLAGARD

The cool rain shower drove
The black prows of the warships swiftly
Forward along the coast, and the
Shield-bearing galleys proudly bore their rig.
The glorious lord saw metal-roofed
Constantinople before the bow;
Many sleek ships sailed toward the
Tall ramparts of the city.

Bolverk Arnorsson

Who can know Harald's mind that August of 1034 when, having ridden the rapids of the lower Dnieper, crossed the Black Sea and threaded the narrows of the Bosporus, his ship finally hove into view of fabled Constantinople? *Nova Roma*, New Rome; *Basileuousa*, the Queen of Cities; *Megalopolis*, the Great City. To the Rus it was *Tsargrad*, City of Caesar; to Scandinavians, *Miklagard*, the Big City, source of the legends of Asgard, the City of the Gods. It was the jewel of Christendom, the crossroads of continents and seas alike, the capital of a new Roman Empire stretching from the toe of the Italian boot to the deserts of the Holy Land.

A few decades after Harald arrived there, the French priest and chronicler Fulcher of Chartres passed through Constantinople on his way to Jerusalem for the First Crusade. He recalled:

O what a splendid city, how regal, how beautiful, how many churches therein, how many palaces

> raised by men in its avenues and boulevards, how many works of art, breathtaking to see. It would be tiresome to tell of the plentitude of treasures, of gold and silver, clothing of many styles, and such holy relics. Ships are always putting in to port, and there is nothing that men desire that is not delivered there.

Likewise, the French historian Odo of Deuil stopped by on his way to the Second Crusade. Odo had a low opinion of Byzantines, and of the Byzantine emperor in particular, but not of their capital: “It is the glory of the Greeks, rich in fame, and richer yet in truth.”

Their Constantinople was but a shadow of the one to which Harald voyaged. In 1034 the Byzantine Empire was at a peak of power not seen since the reign of the Emperor Justinian, 500 years before, and its beating heart was Constantinople. The city’s waterways were crisscrossed with the wakes of lateen-sailed Arab dhows and feluccas, fat-bellied Venetian and Genoese merchantmen, and the oar-sweeping biremes of the imperial navy. Above them, seven hills lifted tier upon tier of gleaming palaces, churches and towers to the heavens.

Yet the soldier in Harald would also have noted the city’s thirteen miles of walls, studded with some fifty bastions, and the great chain across the mouth of the Golden Horn (today’s Halic, its natural harbor) barring entry to hostile fleets. They made Constantinople the world’s most impregnable fortress, and for good reason.

Harald had not come all that way alone. His renown was already such that some 500 Rus warriors had chosen to follow him. (Though Rognvald Brusason, with an eye toward reclaiming his earldom in the Orkneys, had chosen to stay behind in Kiev and eventually return to Scandinavia in the service of young Magnus.) Such numbers would have required a small fleet of dugout *monoxylai* boats or Norse-style longships, enough to attract the attention of the city sentinels. Several times over the past century and a half the Rus had tried to take Constantinople by storm, with fleets of up to 2,000 ships and 80,000 men, going so far as to beach their boats and roll them past the block chain on logs in order to assault from upriver. They had been foiled every time by the city’s moats and triple-layered walls. (As shall be seen, Prince Yaroslav hadn’t totally given up on the idea of attacking the Great City himself, and it is not inconceivable that Harald went there as his spy.) No watchman worth the name would have simply admitted 500 foreign troops into the city, but with them remaining aboard ship in one of its seven

walled harbors, their leader would have been permitted through the gates and onto its streets.

From either shore of the peninsula on which the city rose, the way to the imperial residences and seat of government on easternmost First Hill was through a labyrinth of narrow alleyways between tenements, taverns, stables, warehouses and whorehouses. “The city is rather dirty and smelly and many places exist in perpetual darkness,” reported Odo. “The rich build their homes to overhang the streets, leaving these dank and filthy places to travelers and the poor.”

The avenues thronged with nearly half a million people, outnumbering the population of Kiev by perhaps ten to one, mingling in a cacophony of horses and camels and goats, merchants and beggars, gossips and prostitutes, artists and musicians, street performers and street preachers, aristocrats borne above it all in sedan chairs, a profusion of races, dress and tongues from as far away as England and Spain, Africa and India.

The crowd cleared, however, when visitors emerged onto the *Mese*, the Middle Street. Over twenty-five yards across, this boulevard ran between colonnaded porticoes, shops and bazaars hawking everything from bread and cheese, fruit and fish, to cloth, metalwork and slaves. Spacious Roman-style public forums served as much as marketplaces – the Forum of Theodosius doubled as a hog abattoir – as public squares. Fresh, clean water was freely available in steady supply, brought via miles-long aqueducts and stored in vast underground cisterns. Buried sewers washed waste away. There were public baths and libraries, hospitals and orphanages. The streets could be lit at night! It was enough to make a Norseman’s head spin in wonderment. Truly Harald had arrived in the big city.

Furthermore, the *Mese* was the route of imperial processions, dotted with statues of past emperors and empresses. The Forum of Constantine, the city’s largest, boasted yet more statuary and the 700-year-old Column of Constantine, so ancient that it was actually outside the city walls when erected. It was said to contain in its base holy relics, including the adze with which Noah carved his ark, the ointment jar with which Mary Magdalene anointed Christ’s feet, and baskets that had held loaves and fish at the Feeding of the Multitudes. It was topped, fifty yards up on a tower of cylindrical blocks of porphyry – rare purple marble – with a statue of the city’s founder, Constantine the Great, worthy of both Christian and pagan

veneration. In the guise of Apollo (actually a statue of Apollo with the head replaced with Constantine's), he bore an orb containing a fragment of the True Cross.

Indeed, in Constantinople it was difficult to find any venue, imperial or not, without its own shrine to the city's benefactress, the Mother Mary, or a church or monastery without a holy relic brought from some far corner of the Christian world. Here was the Virgin's belt; there, her robe; the swaddling blanket of the baby Jesus and the bloody cloth he wore on the cross; the Crown of Thorns, the Holy Lance, the door-stone of the Holy Tomb. Secular modern readers may scoff, but Christianity was so woven into Byzantine life that all was accepted without question.

In fact, if Harald had taken any lesson from Olaf's, and thus Charlemagne's, use of monotheism as a tool for political unification, in Constantinople he saw it carried to the extreme. Traveling the *Mese* toward the Great Palace, which stood high on the city promontory, was like proceeding up the central aisle of a church toward the altar, where sin, redemption and punishment all came together.

Half a millennium old when Harald visited, the city's prime cathedral, the Hagia Sophia, was the world's largest church, and it would be so for almost half a millennium more.[1] Decorated in multicolored marble and verd antique, soaring skyward on slender pillars and pendentive arches – a Byzantine invention – its Great Dome rose more than 180 feet high and 100 feet across, seeming less to rest on earth than be suspended from heaven. Whether to honor Thor, Odin or Christ, there was nothing in Harald's world like it. Fifty years earlier, emissaries of Yaroslav's father Grand Prince Vladimir had reported of it back to Kiev, "We didn't know if we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such magnificence or opulence anywhere else in the world. We cannot begin to describe it. We know only that God dwells among the Greeks, and that their service surpasses the worship of any other land, for we cannot forget that beauty."

Yet where there was great sanctity, there was great wickedness, practically next door – the Hippodrome, the 1,300-foot racetrack with seating for 100,000, where in addition to horse and chariot racing, criminals were maimed, blinded and executed, and, in the Nika riots of the year 532, the imperial army had cornered and slaughtered 30,000 of the city's rebellious

citizens. It had its own royal box, the *Kathisma*, with a private passage leading directly into the Great Palace, so that the emperor did not have to mix with commoners. He remained as aloof as God on earth, which in effect he was.

Visitors to the palace entered via the Chalke Gate, the Brazen Gate, through a vestibule with walls of red, white and green marble and a ceiling of intricate mosaics. Within the walls lay a paradise of gardens, ponds and terraces interspersed with private churches, pavilions and swimming pools, a zoo and an aviary, gold-roofed palaces and a fountain that ran with wine, even a stadium for *tzykanion*, a kind of polo played with lacrosse nets instead of mallets.

Harald, however, only glimpsed all this. His destination was just inside the gate. This section of the palace had formerly been the barracks of the *Exkoubitores*, "the sentinels." Originally an imperial guard composed of Byzantine nobles, they had embroiled themselves in several attempted assassinations and coups, after which they had been relegated to be little more than an army unit and stationed in faraway Thrace and Bithynia, where they no longer posed a threat. Their former barracks, the *Exkoubita*, was now the home of their replacements, the *Tagma ton Varangon*. The Varangian Guard.

After all those failed invasions the Varangians had learned the easiest way to gain imperial gold through combat was simply to earn it. For over a century Byzantine emperors, when they were not fighting foreigners, had employed them in mercenary units, the *Hetairia*. (In ancient Greece, a *hetaira* was a high-class prostitute, but the masculine, plural form of the word, *hetairoi*, was more akin to companions, companies.) Varangians served not only as an elite fighting unit but as imperial bodyguards, the Grand *Hetairia* or "Varangians of the City." Dependent on the emperor's good will for their living, the Varangian Guard were considered more loyal to the throne than Byzantine troops susceptible to the fickle favors of court aristocrats. Over a hundred years later, the loyalty of the "axe-wielding barbarians" was still well known to the Byzantine historian and princess Anna Komnene, daughter of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos, who compiled the *Alexiad*, a 12th-century account of her father's reign. "The Varangians," she wrote, "…who carried their axes on their shoulders, regarded their loyalty to the Emperors and their protection of the imperial persons as a pledge and ancestral tradition, handed

down from father to son, which they hold sacred, and they will certainly not listen to even the slightest word about treachery."

But they had another well-earned reputation, too, for drunken debauchery. Repeating the Greeks, Snorri called them *vinbelgir*, wineskins. To be paid for fighting, drinking and carousing was a job description that surely appealed to every Northman, and a Varangian with 500 warriors at his command certainly warranted an interview. The Guard probably never totaled more than 6,000 men at any one time, meaning Harald personally represented more than an eight percent increase in troop strength. Their commander, the *Akolouthos*, the Acolyte or Follower, who stood beside the emperor on state appearances, was always a Greek, but was assisted by a corps of interpreters to give the young Norseman a hearing.

Harald doubtless had his ideal posting already in mind: that of Bolli Bollason, an Icelander who had journeyed through Norway in 1027, while Harald's brother Olaf was king. Olaf had regarded Bolli as "a man of high mettle," says the Icelandic *Laxdaela Saga*. "He held Bolli in great esteem, for he deemed him without equal among men."

Bolli had then been on his way to Byzantium, where he had joined the Varangian Guard and risen quickly through the ranks. In just three years he made his fortune, and he headed back to Iceland in 1030, the year Olaf tried to reclaim his throne. Whether or not they crossed paths, Harald must certainly have heard of Bolli's return. The sagas record:

> He wore furs which the Greek king had given him, over everything a red cape, and he had [his sword] Footbiter on him, with its gilded hilt, and the grip woven with gold. He had a gilded helmet on his head, and a red shield at his side, with a knight painted on it in gold…and whenever they took quarters the women could do nothing but gaze on Bolli and his grandeur, and that of his men.

Recall that Olaf's sword Hneitir was gold-hilted, though Olaf never served Byzantium and likely had received the blade as a gift, or had it made in emulation.

In true mercenary fashion, recruitment to the Guard was arranged as a business transaction for both sides. Postings were for sale, but the buy-in was steep – a minimum of ten pounds of gold to join the combat units, and sixteen pounds to join the imperial bodyguards, rising by the pound for higher ranks. Varangians in the Grand *Hetairia* were paid forty-four *nomismata*, gold coins (at seventy-two to the pound) each month, and those in the combat *Hetairia* forty. On top of that came bonuses at Easter and on the occasion of imperial

coronations, not to mention a cut of booty won on campaigns and even a taste of tax revenue, for which the Varangians acted as imperial collectors. On this basis a recruit might earn back his initial investment in a year and a half or so – assuming he lived to be paid.

Harald had the funds to buy a posting, perhaps even one in the palace guard. Nevertheless, he signed on to the fighting units. Spy or not, he evidently meant to keep a low profile. According to the *Morkinskinna*, he went so far as to enlist under a false name: "Harald immediately entered the emperor's service and called himself Nordbrikt. It was not generally known that he was of royal blood. On the contrary, he urged everyone to conceal the fact because foreigners are shunned [on entering the ranks of the Guard] when they are the progeny of kings."

Nord, of course, refers to the North. Brikt is a Norwegian male name, meaning bright or shiny, but also a form of the Old Norse *brigd*, meaning to break or breach, or alternatively to claim the right to forfeited land. From this we might take it that Harald, at least for the benefit of his new masters, was announcing a break with the North while still keeping his claim close to heart. His identity does not seem to have long been a secret, nor of much concern to the Byzantines. A commander among the Guard, an Icelander named Mar Hunrodarson, was suspicious of the new arrival and came sniffing around for information from two of Harald's lieutenants, fellow Icelanders, both cousins of Bolli Bollason. "They were men of exceeding strength and superb warriors," according to *King Harald's Saga*, "and were very close to Harald."

Ulf Ospaksson had probably fought for Harald's brother Olaf at Stiklestad. And Halldor Snorrason may be the Icelander to whom we owe the most for our knowledge of Harald's life and times, for he was an ancestor of Snorri Sturluson and would pass down to his descendants a wealth of tales about the king. At this point, however, neither one of them was talking, at least not to Mar. "Mar wanted to talk with Harald," reports the *Morkinskinna*, "but Harald would have nothing to do with him. Mar got nowhere."

Like most mercenary commanders through the ages, the *Akolouthos* doubtless cared little whether his recruits were criminals or kings, as long as they could handle a weapon with skill. And when it came to intrigues, Harald was a novice compared to the secrets, plots and treacheries of the imperial court.

In April of 1034, just a few months prior to Harald's arrival, the imperial throne had changed hands, and not peaceably. In the five and a half years of his reign the old emperor, Romanos III Argyros, had proven to be both a poor general and a poorer husband. Suffering a catastrophic defeat against the Saracens at Aleppo, though, proved much less dangerous to his health than the antagonism of his wife, Empress Zoe, and her younger sister Theodora.

As daughters of the previous Emperor Constantine VIII, they were were both Porphyrogenitae – "born in the purple," in the delivery room in the Great Palace walled with purple porphyry, though really meaning "of imperial blood" – but for all that were total opposites. Theodora was tall and slim, dark-haired, unattractive but outgoing, yet parsimonious. Zoe was blonde and shapely, famed for her beauty, more circumspect in speech than her sister but cleverer, and free with her money. (A third sister, Eudokia, the eldest, had been sent to a nunnery as a girl and played little role in history.) They had spent most of their indolent lives penned together in the imperial *gynaikeion*, the women's quarters of the palace, until they thoroughly detested each other.

Yet events had thrust them both to the forefront of imperial politics. Their father, Constantine VIII, last of the Macedonian dynasty dating back two centuries, had been desperate to continue the family line. On his deathbed in November 1028 he had commanded Romanos, then the sixty-year-old prefect (mayor) of Constantinople, to divorce his wife and send her to an abbey so that he could marry one of the imperial daughters. Theodora refused, with the excuse that Romanos was their third cousin – in those days, not much of an excuse. Zoe, in her mid-fifties and notoriously vain – she would convert her private chambers into a literally Byzantine laboratory of piping, braziers and beakers to prepare her special beauty potions and ointments – accepted, and immediately exerted her new power, finding an excuse to dispatch Theodora, like Eudokia, to a nunnery. If Zoe thought of herself as a royal prize, however, she soon learned otherwise. Her marriage to Romanos was not only childless, but loveless, and quickly turned sour.

Between them came John the *Orphanotrophos* (a post created in the 4th century as curator of the imperial orphanage, but by Romanos' time amounting to chamberlain or prime minister), a career climber from a

disreputable family of Paphlagonia on the north Turkish coast. Michael Psellos, then an obscure young court secretary but later a prominent politician and historian, recalled John as “a man of low and odious fortune, but gifted with an extremely nimble and clever mind.” He was always on the lookout to advance himself and his younger brothers, Constantine, George, Nikitas and especially the youngest, handsome twenty-four-year-old Michael, for whom he arranged an introduction to the imperial couple.

“Michael was neither of the imperial clan, nor an emperor’s son, nor even did he have the stature of a distinguished officer,” reported the contemporary Armenian chronicler Aristakes Lastivertsi. “In fact he was a rather unimportant palace bureaucrat.”

“The emperor, giving him one look and asking a few polite questions, bid him on his way, but to remain at court,” recorded Psellos. “His effect on Zoe, however, was something else. Her eyes ablaze with a light as bright as the youth’s beauty, she immediately succumbed to his charm, and from some imagined pairing fell in love with him…. Zoe could neither regard the young man with cool indifference, nor control her passion.”

Aristakes put it even more plainly: “The queen hungered for him with a whore’s perverted lust.”

The two quickly launched into a torrid affair, making no effort to hide their indiscretions. Romanos was either blind to the lovers, or turned a blind eye to them, which only made them bolder. The empress adorned Michael in jewelry and cloth-of-gold raiments and in private moments, it was said, went so far as to seat him on the imperial throne, scepter in hand. She and John contrived to have him named a servant of the imperial bedchamber, close to the emperor in his most unguarded moments. No one was surprised when Romanos’ health went into precipitous decline, and everyone suspected the empress and her paramour. “It was broadly agreed among those at court that they first drugged him into a stupor, and ultimately resorted to a concoction of hellebore [the poisonous Christmas or Lenten rose] as well,” wrote Psellos. “I am not denying that for a moment – it may be true, it may not – but I do contend that Zoe and Michael caused his death.”

On April 11 Romanos died, quite suddenly, in his bath. “As soon as he entered that golden tub of warm water,” reported Aristakes, “attendants seized him by the hair and held him under until he gave up the ghost. In this

they had the queen's backing."[2]

"Several people came into the room, including the empress herself, with no bodyguard and appearing stricken with grief," concurred Psellos. "After a look at him, however, she went off, satisfied at having seen to it he was dying." Zoe was not a widow very long. She and Michael were married that day, and he was crowned as Emperor Michael IV, the Paphlagonian, the very next day. Alexios Stoudites, the patriarch of the Church of Constantinople, at first refused to condone such an obvious usurpation, until fifty pounds of gold was donated to the church.

With the crown on Michael's head, however, the Paphlagonians had less need of an empress. John took over the machinery of government, doling out appointments, money and favors as he saw fit, particularly to his other brothers. He replaced Zoe's maidservants and staff with informers loyal to him and Michael and, except for state occasions when her presence was required, shut her back up under guard in the *gynaikeion*. Even the emperor avoided the empress, and Zoe's second marriage quickly went even worse than the first. "I neither commend nor accuse Michael for it," admitted Psellos, "for though I can hardly praise his dislike for his patroness or his attitude towards her, I can understand his fear of her – fear that he too would be murdered, like Romanos."

Zoe did not fight them on this, at least not openly. As a woman, even as empress, she did not have the power. On her side, however, she had the love of the people. And more than that, Michael and John had to have it in the back of their minds that she was sitting up late at night in her little bedroom lab, cooking up fresh batches of hellebore.

This was the nest of vipers into which Harald set foot that autumn of 1034. With his bona fides established and his worth acknowledged, it seems he did actually warrant an imperial audience. To the dignitaries of the court it would have meant little more than a courtesy extended to an emissary of a foreign prince, squeezed in between other introductions being made, agreements needing decided, moneys needing disbursed, matters of law needing judged and disputes needing resolved. To Harald, though, it meant his presentation to the most powerful people in the Western world.

Seventy-five years earlier, Emperor Constantine VII had set down the

proper conduct of imperial business – a combination of Romanesque bureaucracy, Greek culture, and Christian faith – in his *Book of Ceremonies*. Receptions and audiences were held just east of the *Augustaion*, the Great Square, next to the Chalke Gate and through a columned courtyard full of statuary, in the *Magnaura*, the Great Hall. Its triple-naved basilica was lit by golden candelabras hanging from chains of silvered copper, with Persian carpets and fragrant blossoms scattered underfoot. Senators, generals, patricians and aristocrats took pride of place, with foreigners and those of lower class behind them, all arranged in their proper precedence. Closer to the throne stood the high officials and favorites of the court, precisely like the Apostles around Christ. Business was conducted in a kind of slow-motion dance to the low music of a choir in the background, the various partners moving in a precise manner to emulate the harmony and order of God's creation, all revolving around the center of the universe.

The emperor was seated on the imperial throne between a pair of immense lions of gilded bronze, protected by two ranks of Varangian guardsmen, resplendent in blued and gilded armor, bearing their characteristic weapons. As Psellos described them, "These men are all equipped with shields and the *rhomphaia*, a one-edged sword of heavy iron which they wear suspended from the right shoulder." The *rhomphaia* had originated as a Thracian polearm but evolved over the centuries. By Harald's time the term is commonly thought to have referred to a two-handed sword worn in a baldric, but some historians believe a more accurate translation of the original Greek is, "The whole group bear shields and carry on their right shoulders a single-edged, heavy iron weapon." In other words, an axe.

In their center sat the emperor, wearing a tunic of white silk under an imperial purple Grecian-style wrap, the *chlamys*, or even the *loros*, the longer, embroidered robe of state. His chest bore a heavy, embroidered cloth-of-gold collar crusted with precious stones, and his head the imperial crown, studded with jewels and draped with strings of pearls. Michael IV was only a few years older than Harald. "He was a handsome young man," conceded Psellos, who knew the emperor personally, "with the bloom of youth about him, as fresh as a blossom, bright-eyed and in truth very 'apple-cheeked.'"

Harald had fought and killed more imposing men on the battlefield, and in single combat could have easily slain this former clerk from a family of moneychangers. The emperor's power, however, was of a different sort –

power to send armies to doom or glory, and men to death in their thousands – and he was in his own way also a killer. It was Michael, according to the whispers at court, who had held Romanos' head under the bath water. Here was a man who by an act of murder had made himself a god.

Evidence of his divinity was on display right there in the throne room, for Michael suffered from the "sacred disease" that had afflicted the old Roman caesars: epilepsy. Far from proudly displaying the fact, he took pains to keep it hidden from public view, as Psellos wrote:

> Whenever Michael wished to grant an audience or carry out one of the daily ceremonies, certain courtiers were entrusted to observe and keep watch over him. These officials hung red curtains to both sides of him, and as soon as they saw him cock his head a bit or nod, or give whatever other signs they knew meant his sickness was coming on, they at once asked those present to adjourn, drew the curtains closed, and attended to him in privacy.

Michael's most trusted supporter was, of course, his eldest brother John. "John was a faithful protector of the emperor and a true brother," admitted Psellos, "for he never relaxed his guard, day or night." Nothing escaped the notice of the *Orphanotrophos*, especially not a rough-hewn northern barbarian entering into the imperial presence. "If ever a man was canny, he was. His piercing gaze was evidence of that…. In his everyday business he wore a fierce expression which frightened one and all."

As he came under that look from this most dangerous of men, Harald must carefully have kept his own thoughts hidden, for they were surely a mixture of respect, pity and scorn. John was at least four or five years older than Michael, but looked younger, because unlike his brother and practically every other man of the court, John wore no beard. Not clean-shaven, but simply bare-chinned, for as was customary for officials of the Byzantine court in preparation for high posting, John had been gelded at an early age. Castration was a matter of state policy, intended to clear eunuchs' minds of distracting lusts and relieve them of any hereditary aspirations. In John's case it certainly had not worked. Having put one brother on the throne, he was raising the others to high office as fast as possible, letting neither emperors nor empresses get in his way.

Used and set aside, Zoe had at least been let out of her cage this day. Following protocol, she sat in her assigned place, slightly behind her husband, but playing little more than a decorative role in events. According to Psellos, she eschewed the heavy jewelry and robes of state, preferring

instead to drape herself in thin silks:

> [Zoe was] well rounded, although not very tall. Her large eyes were set wide apart, with a dignified brow. Her nose tended toward the aquiline, without being overly so. She had hair of gold, and her entire body glowed with the paleness of her skin. There was little sign of her age. In fact, if you noticed the perfect proportions of her limbs, and did not know her, you would have thought she was a young woman, for her skin was unwrinkled, glossy and smooth, with no lines anywhere.

Beholding this voluptuous blonde imperatrix for the first time, Harald would have done well to avert his gaze again and mask his feelings. Likewise Zoe, when she first laid eyes on this young, strapping blond outlander, a man the likes of whom was rarely seen at court, and whose loyalty was literally for sale. Compared with her sister Theodora, Psellos noted, "Zoe was the quicker to grasp matters at hand, but slower to speak of them…a woman of passionate desires, prepared equally for life or death."

Two versions of Harald's introduction to the court have come down through history, both a long way from firsthand, but displaying a telling difference. Over forty years after the fact, Katakalon Kekaumenos, thought to be the Byzantine author of the *Strategikon*, a manual of military and household operations and almost incidentally a history of the era, documented how courtiers remembered it: nothing special. "He [Harald, whom Kekaumenos called by the Greek version of his name, Araltes] entered, and the emperor received him according to protocol."

But 200 years afterward, Snorri put down the account presumably retold by Harald and his Varangians: "In those years the Greek empire was ruled by the Empress Zoe the Great, and with her Michael Catalactus ["the Moneychanger," a moniker certainly not learned from Byzantines respectful of the emperor]. When Harald came to Constantinople he introduced himself to the empress, and went into her service."

Exactly who really ruled in Byzantium, the emperor or empress, and whom Harald served, were questions that would eventually need to be answered. For now, all that mattered was that Harald had gone into the palace as an unemployed sword-hand and come back out as an imperial soldier. Celebrations were due. Constantinople was stranger and more extraordinary to a Northman than the Greenland colonies on the far side of the world. Time now for Harald – Nordbrikt, Araltes – to find out if its taprooms and fleshpots were equally as wondrous.

NOTES

1 It was named for neither St. Sophia of Rome nor St. Sophia the Martyr, but in reverence to the Greek *sophia*, wisdom; the cathedrals of Novgorod and Kiev were named in emulation of it. Converted to a mosque by invading Ottomans in 1453, it was made over into a museum in 1935, but reconsecrated as a mosque in 2020.

2 It should be noted here that a curious feature of the Varangian Guard's renowned loyalty was that it was loyalty to the throne, no matter who sat on it. In 969, when Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas was stabbed to death in his sleep by his nephew John Tzimiskes, the Guard arrived in the imperial bedroom a moment too late. Finding the usurper standing over his victim, dripping blood, rather than exact vengeance they knelt down and swore their loyalty to the assassin as the new emperor. If Michael or even Zoe had come at Romanos with drawn blades, Varangians would have cut them down in mid-stride, but judging or punishing an assassination after the fact was not their duty.

PART TWO

Many a crest in air is streaming,
Many a helmet darkly gleaming,
Many an arm the axe uprears,
Doomed to hew the wood of spears.
All around the crowded ranks,
Horses neigh and armor clanks;
Chiefs are shouting, clarions ringing,
Louder still the bard is singing,
“Gather, footmen; gather, horsemen,
To the field, ye valiant Norsemen!”

Sir Walter Scott

VI

VARANGIAN

The valiant ruler reddened swords in battle
And entered paid service.
War was waged every year thereafter.

Bolverk Arnorsson

"That very autumn," Snorri wrote of Harald, "he joined the crew of a galley patrolling the seas east of Greece."

The Aegean had been a naval battleground for ancient superpowers since the dawn of time – Egyptians against Sea Peoples, Greeks against Persians, Romans against Carthaginians – but for the past few centuries it had been Byzantines versus Saracens. In the 200 years leading up to AD 1000 Christians and Muslims had fought nearly thirty major sea battles. The Greeks had won more than half, yet the Arabs had managed to secure the strategic islands, including Sicily, Crete and much of Cyprus, that controlled the east–west trade routes through the Mediterranean. By the time Harald arrived, however, the rulers of Byzantium's Macedonian dynasty were striking back. Muslim corsairs, the *ghazi*, had plundered the Adriatic coast and Corfu with fleets of up to a thousand ships, but the *strategos* (general/admiral/military governor) Nikephoros Karantenos had driven them off, sending hundreds of prisoners to Constantinople in chains. In 1033 the *protospatharios* (governor) Tekneas of Abydos led a Byzantine fleet to Egypt to raid Alexandria itself, capturing numerous ships and plentiful spoils and getting away clean.

But the Muslims were not finished. In September 1034, just after Harald arrived in Constantinople, they had raided Thrace (modern Bulgaria) and sacked the town of Myra in Lycia, on the south Anatolian coast, famous for its shrine to St. Nicholas, the patron saint of sailors.

The first actual historic use of the term *Varangoi* refers to Varangians posted that winter in the Thracesian Theme (military province) in western Anatolia. (Thracesian, not Thracian; the Thracesian was opposite the Aegean from Thrace itself, but had been named for the Thracian division of the old East Roman army, which was last posted and eventually settled there.) In 1029 the *strategos* of the theme, Constantine Diogenes, had been implicated in the Porphyrogenita Theodora's plans for a coup, for which she was banished to the convent, and he committed suicide. The Varangians may have been sent as a counterweight against any further treachery. If so, they went about it with typical heavy-handedness, as the contemporary Byzantine historian George Cedrenus wrote:

> One of the Varangians posted to winter quarters in the Thracesian Theme met a local woman alone and sweet-talked her, but when she would not give in he tried to rape her. She got hold of the foreigner's sword and stabbed him through the heart, killing him instantly. When word spread of his death the Varangians together honored her by giving her everything the man owned, and they dumped his body unburied, according to the law about suicides.

At the beginning of 1035, however, the Varangians were about to earn their combat pay. *Ghazi* from Sicily and Tunisia had returned to raid the Aegean and the Thracesian coast itself. According to the 11th-century Greek historian John Skylitzes, "The Africans' ships caused widespread destruction in the Cyclades [islands]" – a succinct description of aquamarine shorelines and pristine white-walled villages stained red, men slain, women and children carried off into slavery, and the cause of Allah advanced. Skylitzes went on to say the troops sent to guard those areas were mobilized against the pirates, which means Varangians and naval action. Snorri summed up the entire adventure equally succinctly – "Harald sailed to many of the Greek islands and wrought heavy vengeance on the pirates" – but it is not hard to surmise the details of Harald's experience on the campaign.

The fleets of the neighboring coastal themes, Samos on the western and Cibyrrhaeots on the southern, were normally tasked with policing the sea

lanes. A century earlier the imperial and thematic fleets together came to some 425 vessels, and since then the Macedonian emperors (at least, up to Zoe's father Constantine VIII) had only strengthened the navy. Marching down to Samos, the military harbor on the Anatolian coast (the Samos Theme was the naval contingent of the Thracesian Theme), Harald would have looked out over sunny blue water and a forest of masts, flags and sails, the likes of which few Norsemen had ever seen.

Viking longships, square-sailed and clinker-built of oak planks with overlapping edges, were fast before the wind, spacious enough for cargo below deck, and flexible enough to weather high seas and cross entire oceans – ideal for exploring, trading and raiding. The dominant Byzantine warship of the age, the *dromon* (courser), was not designed for any of that. The 2005 discovery and subsequent excavation of over thirty buried ships in Istanbul's southern Yenikapi neighborhood, formerly Constantinople's Harbor of Theodosius, revealed the *dromon* to be a kind of simplified Roman trireme. Instead of three banks of oars, it had just two, one on deck and one below. It averaged a little over 100 feet long, but just fourteen feet across, with fifty oarsmen per side – not slaves, but highly trained and skilled sailors, all of whom doubled as fighting men – plus a complement of fifty officers, crew and dedicated marines. Larger versions carried up to 150 rowers plus crew and soldiers, totaling 200, and a few even more massive capital ships hosted 230 oarsmen, 300 including troops and crew. With Arab-style lateen sails fore and aft, a *dromon* would leave a Viking longship far astern, at least when sailing into the wind. Its hull of black pine and Old World sycamore was carvel-built, with planks laid edge-to-edge and fastened to a frame, so strong it had rendered the ancient underwater ram obsolete. Instead its bow carried an above-water beak or spur for peeling entire banks of oars off opposing ships. Its freeboard was so low that it was liable to be swamped in even moderate Mediterranean seas, and would not have lasted more than a few minutes in a North Atlantic squall (though, with little ballast, it would not sink). The *dromon* was not meant for exploring or carrying cargo. It was a weapon in and of itself, designed for just one purpose: to kill other ships.

In addition, the Byzantine fleet also included transport and supply vessels with water and food – cheese, salt pork, beans and hardtack bread – for the warships, but also a number of smaller, lighter, faster monoreme galleys with crews of just a hundred men, including fifty to sixty oarsmen, for

communications and scouting. In his manual *De Re Militari* ("On the Military"), the 4th-century writer Vegetius noted that the sails and rigging of Roman scout boats, *scaphae*, and even the crew's clothing, were dyed blue as camouflage, and there's no reason to think the Byzantines did not continue the practice.

It is believed that Varangians most often served on these smaller galleys, which were nearest in design to their familiar longships, besides being perfect for pirate hunting and more suited to their free-for-all fighting style. And it was almost certainly one of these fast, far-ranging scout boats which spotted the Saracen fleet off the coast of Lycia that May – crucially, between Thracesia and the Cibyrrhaeots.

By staying just within sight of each other and using signal flags, fires or mirrors, the Byzantine monoremes could quickly relay word, ship to ship, over the horizon and all the way back to the fleets. (On land the Byzantines used a beacon relay that could transmit a message the length of Asia Minor, 450 miles, in an hour.) Aboard their flagships the *droungarioi*, fleet commanders, and *komites*, counts commanding squadrons of three to five *dromones* each, worked out battle plans to finally put an end to Saracen piracy.

Mid-May is about when the Etesians, the dry summer winds the Greeks call the *meltemia*, begin spiraling down out of the Balkans. They blow south across the Aegean and curve southeast around the Anatolian headland, perfect to drive the Thracesian fleet swiftly down through the channels of the Dodecanese islands, into the Sea of Crete and on to Lycia. These, however, were treacherous waters for the Byzantine navy. In the year 655 Emperor Constans II had led a fleet of some 500 *dromones* against a Saracen navy half its size. The Muslims had retreated into the harbor of Phoenicus, modern Finike, and lashed their vessels together into a single huge raft, bristling with masts. (As raiders, the Saracens favored heavier cargo-capable ships called *shalandi*, a variation of the Byzantine cargo galley, the *chelandion*.) Unable to fight ship-to-ship, the Byzantines' numerical superiority was mooted. They had to close, board and fight hand-to-hand. Both sides endured heavy losses until the Arabs grappled the emperor's own *dromon*. Constans only escaped by diving over the side. Five hundred Byzantine ships were lost. This Battle of the Masts went down as the first great Saracen victory at sea.

In the centuries since, the Byzantines had refined and perfected their

principles of naval combat, as set down by the 9th-century strategist and tactician Syrianos Magistros, thought to be the author of the treatise *Naumachia* (“Naval Battle”). That was utilized heavily around the year 900 by Emperor Leo VI, the Wise, in a chapter of his own military manual, the *Taktika*. And that was updated around 1000 by the Byzantine commander-in-chief Nikephoros Ouranos, viceroy to Emperor Basil II, and subsequently copied by Arab spies and scribes for use by their own navy. Now sea battles were all fought according to the same tactics – above all, that of avoiding engagement altogether, unless victory was almost certain. Fleets of *dromones* and their support vessels were hugely expensive, not to be unduly risked. Emperor Leo had cautioned his *strategoi*, “without some urgent necessity, you should not rush into battle.”

After a thousand years, little is remembered of the sea battle of 1035 except the outcome. It is sometimes referred to as the battle of the Cyclades, though some historians even claim there were two pirate fleets and two battles, probably because Skylitzes makes two separate mentions of it. Sicily and Tunisia, however, were at this time both part of the Fatimid Caliphate. There was no reason to send two separate fleets when a large combined task force would be all the more invincible.

Skylitzes names the patrician Constantine Chage, *droungarios* of the Cibyrrhaeot fleet, as overall Byzantine commander. The Thracesians and Cibyrrhaeots, having either caught the Sicilians and Tunisians between them, or rendezvoused at sea and set upon them together, evidently felt sure enough of their advantage to attack. In that case, Nikephoros advised, “If there is a desperate need or you expect that you will win easy victory, and you intend to launch an attack, arrange your *dromones* according to the weather, the coastline, the preparations of the enemy and their arrangement.”

Unlike warships of the gunpowder age, which sailed line-ahead to bare broadsides to the enemy, ancient galleys fought line-abreast because their main weapon – originally the ram but in Harald’s time the beak and, as shall be seen, the *siphon* – were all in their bows. The objective was to keep these toward the enemy ships and, more precisely, toward the vulnerable steering gear in their sterns. With this as the goal, Leo advised, “Sometimes [you should draw up] a crescent-shaped or sigma-shaped formation [at this time in Greek writing, not the early sigma, Σ, but the later lunate sigma, C] in a semi-circle…. The crescent arrangement should ensure that, when the enemy ships

attack, they are enclosed within the curve."

At sea, as on land, in classical warfare the double envelopment was every commander's dream, and nightmare. While the heaviest *dromones* engaged in the center, faster ships on the wings would swing around to take the enemy in the rear. Syrianos wrote:

> So that the enemy do not extend their own line across and prevent the envelopment when they see the outflanking movement, the flankers should not immediately come to grips with their opponents but remain positioned behind their own fleet until both fleets engage. When they see that the lines are engaged, then they should make the outflanking movement and come around behind the enemy, keeping as far enough away from them to prevent their capture by the stronger [enemy ships], but still closing with and attacking those who are making the most effective assaults on our men.

With the Etesian wind at their backs, making an easier job for their rowers, the imperial battle line swept down onto the Saracens. While most of the Varangians may have manned the flanker boats, it is likely Harald himself – a prince of repute, commanding his own unit of elite fighting men – was posted to no less than the flagship. The viceroy Ouranos had advised naval commanders: "It is certainly advisable, *strategos*, for you to choose from the whole navy bigger and braver warriors with exemplary skills and top-quality gear, and to have them aboard your *dromon* and to name it *pamphylos* [flagship]." That certainly describes Harald, who even at this relatively early point in his career had already become something of a favorite of Empress Zoe.

As proof, the *Morkinskinna* offers a ribald little episode which took place before Harald shipped out for the Aegean, when "Nordbrikt" and his men (presumably including his lieutenants Ulf and Halldor) were still quartered at the palace. As already noted, Harald's real identity was not much of a secret at court, but according to the *Morkinskinna* he was nevertheless wary of being caught out. He had called his men together and told them, "people will be eyeing us closely here in Constantinople. They will be trying to guess who we are and won't care if we are expended in battle or otherwise endangered. I think we should say a prayer to Saint Olaf for victory and build a church here in his name, dedicated to the glory of God."

Yet Harald was not so worried about his secret that he would not risk making an impression on the empress herself. Apparently let out of the

confines of her rooms for the day and strolling the palace grounds with her ladies, she took note of the blond Norwegian giant and his men. According to the *Morkinskinna*, "Queen Zoe, approaching them, saw how lordly they acted. She went up to Nordbrikt and said, 'Norseman, give me a lock of your hair.'"

It was no idle request. In ancient times a lock of hair symbolized to some small extent ownership, either magically or romantically, over the donor. For the *basilissa*, the empress of all Christendom, to make such a request was an incident of great remark. Psellos remembered Zoe as "very regal in her ways, a great beauty, imposing in her manner and commanding respect." She would have expected a Byzantine courtier to fall to his knees before her, begging forgiveness for not carrying shears.

But Harald was a prince in his own right, though of an earthier, barbarian sort. Far from cropping himself in front of his men, he took the empress's request as lightly as he might have the advances of a Kievan courtesan. "Let's make an even trade of it, Majesty," he told her. "You give me one of your nether hairs."

"People thought this amusing, though a bit cheeky when spoken to a lady of such lofty station," says the *Morkinskinna* with some understatement. "Paying no more attention, she went on her way."

There's no doubt, however, that Zoe did pay attention. That this mysterious Nordbrikt had the sheer audacity to proposition an empress – and that she did not have the impertinent foreigner immediately imprisoned for the offense and tortured to death at her leisure – goes to show just how much Harald had piqued her interest. And for such a story to have lasted a thousand years indicates it was common knowledge, the subject of quite a bit of palace gossip at the time, enough that a *strategos* of the fleet would certainly know of it, and be well advised to assign the empress's new pet Varangian where an eye could be kept on him.

This was to be Harald's first great sea battle, and whether he was aboard a *dromon* in the center of the action or a galley speeding around the flanks to take the Saracens from behind makes little difference. For him the combat would have gone much the same from the moment he first sighted those triangular Arab sails, like a row of jagged teeth, on the horizon. Sooner or

later, it had to come down to ship-on-ship, man-to-man.

The Battle of the Masts notwithstanding, the first thing a *dromon*'s crew did prior to battle was furl its sails, which were fire hazards in combat, and to prevent them from snapping in collisions, store the masts: pull them up out of the bottom of the ship, take them down and lay them lengthwise along the deck on special crutches. The deck crew donned armor – lamellar scale corselets, chain mail and padded or quilted surcoats – including the oarsmen, who would stop being rowers and become fighting men the moment battle was joined. In the *pseudopation*, the raised forecastle in the bow, and in the *xylokastra*, similar fighting stations amidships, heavy ballistas (oversized crossbows) were wound tight, cocked and loaded with spear-sized bolts, and likewise mangonels (catapults) with pots of flammable oil and stones bound in oil-soaked cloth. In the bow, a brazier was lit beneath a bronze tank and two burly crewmen leaned into a lever-action, piston-powered pump to further pressurize it, while more crewmen practiced their aim with a swiveling spout connected to it. Harald had doubtless heard of this curious weapon, the *siphon*, but never seen it in action, for it had no counterpart in Viking warfare and was perhaps the most closely guarded state secret in the empire.

Now, as the distance closed between the fleets, it was all about the oarsmen. According to Emperor Leo, a good *kentarchos*, ship's captain, kept his men exercised with constant drills and practice runs for just such moments as this. A *dromon* with a fit crew could maintain a steady two or three three knots over a long distance, but in a short burst, with all oarsmen stroke-stroke-stroking at full tilt, it could hit three times that. For Harald, feeling the shallow-draft galley skimming over the waves under him and seeing on either side hundreds of others just like it, all slicing the water in perfect unison, must have brought heady memories of his brother's army plunging down the hill at Stiklestad.

Now, as then, the objective was to get through the missile zone and come to grips as quickly, and with as few losses, as possible. As the distance closed, the ship's ballistas and mangonels began going off, released bowlines and torsion coils cracking like whips. Smoke trails arched between the fleets. Burning oil spattered across the water. Enemy bolts and fireballs began hissing into the sea just short, and then alongside, hitting the ship itself. Now arrows. Now javelins, coming down hard enough to pierce the pine deck. The

bireme's upper-level rowers shipped their oars and took up weapons as their fellows down below deck strove to keep up the relentless pace, taking the ship's momentum literally onto the strength of their own backs. The armored warriors topside raised shields against the incoming rain of points and fire and tightened their grips on sword hilts and axe hafts, close enough now to trade taunts and curses across the waves with scimitar-waving Arabs. Above it all the *kentarchos* was bawling orders at his *kybernetai*, his helmsmen manning the quarter-rudders, the steering oars in the rear of the boat, willing them onto his target at a precise off-angle. The idea was to scrape off the enemy's oars, but any galley that veered too far to attack another bared its own vulnerable side to the next enemy ship over.

At the last minute, up front, one of the *siphonarioi*, the *siphon* crew, lit a wick under its muzzle (because it was dangerous to do so any sooner than necessary) and they aimed it out over the bow. Everyone braced themselves as the *dromon*'s high prow veered over the *shalandi*'s sweeps, then staggered as the ships collided, lurching underfoot and, with a great groan of straining planks and staccato clatter of snapping oars, scraped along each other's hulls. Men ducked as splintered paddle blades and grappling irons flew overhead, and a bellow of battle-rage went up between the ships, men calling on both God and Allah to bring down holy wrath on the enemy. But if any of Harald's young Varangians, relatively new to this kind of fighting at sea, made to immediately charge up the *dromon*'s long prow onto the Arab deck, more experienced hands would have held them back: *watch*.

Up in the bow, a crewman manning the *siphon* opened a valve.

With a roar and a withering blast of heat like dragon's breath, an enormous gout of vivid flame gushed from the *siphon's* muzzle onto the Arab ship. Black smoke and the stench of roasting flesh wafted over the water. The exultant shouts of the enemy turned to screams as men seeking to do Allah's heavenly work against the infidels instead got a taste of Christian hell.

Harald and his men had certainly heard tales of this weapon. A hundred years earlier it had been used against a Rus invasion fleet, of which the 10th-century historian and diplomat Bishop Liutprand of Cremona recorded, "The Greeks began to spray their fire all about, and the Rus, seeing the flames, didn't hesitate to jump overboard, preferring to drown rather than burn alive." The Kievans called it "Greek fire," but the Byzantines called it "liquid fire." It stuck to men, ran down the sides of the enemy ship and even burned on the

water.

Napalm and flamethrowers are common enough weapons today, but no one is exactly sure what ingredients went into Greek fire. The formula was so secret that, once lost, it has never been recovered. It is thought to have consisted primarily of light crude oil, which the Byzantines called *naphtha*, obtained from natural wells in the Crimea and Middle East. The addition of pine resins or animal fats would have made it stickier and burn hotter and longer, perhaps with additives like quicklime, calcium phosphide or saltpeter.

The pump crew kept up the pressure in the tank, and the *siphonarioi* played the fiery stream back and forth over the enemy ship. Now, while the Saracen defenses were suppressed, was the moment for the Byzantine boarding crews. Arab cargo galleys had a higher freeboard than *dromones*, but by taking footholds on its oars' ports and splintered shafts and by hooking grappling irons on ropes or poles over the wales the boarders, even in armor, could haul themselves up. Axe-wielding Norsemen had their own method of scaling wooden walls. The 13th-century Icelandic *Eyrbyggja Saga* recounts tales of Halldor Snorrason's father Snorri Godi ("Snorri the Chieftain"), whose *thegn* Thrand Ingjaldsson, called the Strider, overcame an enemy palisade when he "ran at the wall and leaped so high that he hooked his axe over it, and pulled himself up by the haft until he climbed over the top." This technique would have been known among the Norse of Harald's retinue, but not so the Arab corsairs, who likely had never met Varangians before. A six-foot Norseman with an axe nearly his own height could hook it high up on the rail of a *shalandi* and, while archers on the *dromon*'s deck kept the defenders' heads down, pull himself up and over. The surviving Muslims on deck must have been stunned to find, coming at them through the smoke and flames on their ship like blue *djinn*, *mail-clad giants.*[1] Few weapons were better suited to clearing a crowded deck than a Dane axe with a ten-foot swing.

Quarter was given, or not. As soon as an enemy ship was taken, its fires were smothered with sand or talc or doused, through some esoteric chemical reaction, with vinegar or stale urine. Warriors paused to tip back their helmets, catch their breath, and wipe the gore from their blades. Over the side, as far as could be seen in the tangled mass of burning ships, billowing smoke and floating wreckage, the green and white flags with the crescent of Islam were coming down, and red and gold pennons marked with the Chi-

Rho[2] of Christianity were being run up. In the distance, whatever fragments of the Saracen fleet had not been destroyed had backed water, turned and raised sail for home. Survivors were put to oars to row for their lives – this time, on pain of death, as prisoners and slaves.

They would have done better to die fighting. According to Skylitzes, “500 of the enemy were brought to the emperor alive. All the rest were impaled along the coastline from Adramyttium to Strobilos [the fortress city opposite the island of Kos off the Turkish coast, a distance of over 200 miles].” For what it is worth, it should be said that the Byzantine Greek word for impalement, *anaskolopismos*, is no longer thought to mean the victim being transfixed on a stake, but being hoisted by the neck on a Y-shaped cross, the *phourkas*, to be strangled or else left to die of exposure. The difference, of course, is of importance only to the victim. (In a second reference Skylitzes says the remaining victims were drowned.)

Though hardly remembered as one of the great naval battles of history – in fact, hardly remembered at all – the battle of 1035 was a pivotal Western victory. For the rest of the century, at least, the Mediterranean would be a virtual Byzantine lake, thanks in part to the Varangian Guard, and to one of its newest recruits. The prince of Norway had proven his worth to his new masters.

From now on, however, his struggle would be not only against the Saracens, but against his own commanders.

NOTES

1 Contrary to Disney, not all *djinn*, genies, are blue, but according to the Quran they are born of fire, and in their blued armor and facemasked helmets Varangians would certainly have appeared superhuman.

2 ☧, from X and P, chi and rho, the first two letters of the Greek word ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ, Christos.

VII

COMMAND

It is said eighty cities were captured
In the land of the Saracens.
The generous young lord risked himself
On behalf of the king.

Thjodolf Arnorsson

"That summer [of 1035]," Snorri tells us, "all the [Byzantine] forces went on campaign together."

From the glittering Aegean to the arid Anatolian plateau, fair Harald must have gone ruddy tan, his hair sun-streaked gold, and his hands spattered red with blood, as he marched with the imperial army the length of Asia Minor, bound for the frontiers of empire. Hordes of camel-borne Bedouin *ghazi* raiders and proud Turkish cavalry on fleet Arabian horses fled, submitted, or died before the conquerors. Towns threw open their gates on the army's approach, or were made to suffer for it. Everywhere the imperials were led by the chain-mailed, axe-wielding barbarians of the North and their young blond prince.

"Harald kept his men together in one unit," Snorri wrote. "He had only been in the army a short while before all the Varangians united behind him, and in battle they all fought as one. It wasn't long, then, before Harald was made chief of the Varangians." This is not to say he was made *Akolouthos*, for that rank was always held by a Byzantine. But Norsemen far from home would naturally look to follow one of their own, and in feudal times youth

was no impediment to leadership. Men of royal blood like Harald, who was still only nineteen or twenty, were raised to rule. And the young prince was a natural.

By the time they arrived before the walls of Berkri (modern Muradiye) near Lake Van in eastern Anatolia – the very doorstep of Islam – they were fighting the kind of war Vikings liked least: slow death by siege. Around, against and under the walls of the city, Byzantine troops swarmed like ants through a mound of dirt. Siege engines, covered in hide against fire arrows, bore rams to the gates and drills to the mud walls. Ballistae, mangonels and trebuchets (though man-powered; the counterweight trebuchet would not appear in the Middle East for another hundred years) heaved spear-sized bolts, stones, earthen pots of flaming oil and dead animals into the city. Meanwhile the clink and clatter of furious digging echoed from the mouths of tunnels opening in the imperial lines but ending somewhere far forward, underneath the ramparts, where by candlelight half-naked, sweating men were gradually pulling the earth from under the city in order to collapse its walls.

Harald the warrior must have regarded all this with scorn. There was too little glory and too much grunt work around Berkri. None of these men, from the catapult crews to the miners, ever got within a sword's swing of the enemy. The son of King Sigurd hadn't signed up for this. He had signed up to fight the enemies of the emperor of the Greeks.

Luckily there was a job description for his type in the *Taktika*, the manual of Emperor Leo VI, in which he advised his *strategoi* of primitive psychological warfare:

> You will cause great distress if you choose from among your fighting men and officers the most imposing men, in the peak of health, very large and with bright, shiny armor. [Again, a good description of Harald at this point in his career. Varangians were noted for their colorful clothing and elaborate blued and gilded armor.] Show them off to the defenders by marching them before the walls or battlements. Station the less impressive troops out of sight with the baggage so the enemy will not be able to assess them, men or horses. In this manner they will soon believe that all your men are as impressive as those few they have seen.

So while lesser men did the sweating, Harald, his lieutenants Halldor and Ulf, and their Norsemen could simply stand about and intimidate the enemy with their size and weaponry. The defenders of Berkri could see them, and see the siege machines inching toward the city walls, knowing the miners were doing

likewise beneath their feet, and imagine having to face those menacing Dane axes in the very near future.

The fortress of Berkri controlled access to the valley of the Arsanias River (modern Murat), which flows from Mount Ararat west into the Anatolian interior before turning east again to become the headwaters of the Euphrates. By holding it, the Byzantines could block Saracen access to Asia Minor, and secure their own route into Syria. As a result, the city changed hands repeatedly, its Muslim ruler Aliem playing one side against the other. In 1033 he had sided with the Byzantines, but when he did not receive the expected rewards he sent an invitation to Cairo's Fatimid Caliphate to take the city back. The next year a Saracen army overran Berkri in a dawn attack. Skylitzes says the garrison of 6,000 Byzantines was slaughtered, but according to Aristakes it was 24,000, so many that Aliem "ordered a ditch dug to a depth of a human body, and for the captives to be slaughtered over it until it was filled. Then he climbed in and bathed in the blood of the dead, to calm his angry heart."

This was still several decades before the First Crusade, but several centuries since the adherents of Christ and Mohammed first began watering the desert with each other's blood. During his reign (976–1025) Emperor Basil II had driven the Saracens east as far as Antioch and Edessa, but his co-emperor and successor Constantine VIII (r. 962–1028) had no interest in military operations, and the feckless Romanos III (r. 1028–1034), to put it mildly, was not martially adept. In his ignominious retreat from Aleppo in 1030 Romanos lost 10,000 men (according to the 12th-century Armenian historian Matthew of Edessa, 20,000) and was very nearly taken prisoner himself. The Saracens pressed on as far as Doliche, modern Duluk, today no more than a small village in southeast Turkey but then a city of such note that it was capital of a theme. Its commander, George Maniakes, was made of sterner stuff than his emperor. Skylitzes recorded, "Eight hundred Arabs returning fresh from their victory came to him all full of themselves, ordering him to surrender immediately and abandon his city, since the emperor was taken and the whole Roman army butchered, and he need not put himself in such danger. Otherwise, come dawn he and everyone with him would be surrounded and slaughtered without mercy."

Maniakes ordered food and wine sent out to the conquerors with assurances that the garrison would surrender in the morning and hand over all the money

in the city. “But nigh on midnight,” recounted Skylitzes, “when they had drunk their fill and fallen asleep without a care in the world, George went out and killed them all. He took 280 camels fully laden with all sorts of Roman goods. He cut the noses and ears off the dead and sent them to the emperor.”

Romanos promoted him to *katepano* (captain, commander) of Lower Media, southeast Anatolia. In October 1031 Maniakes further demonstrated his wiles by bribing the Muslim governor of Edessa to surrender the town to him and, with just 400 men, even stood off a Saracen counterattack. One of the spoils was a letter supposedly sent (and signed!) a thousand years earlier by no less than Jesus himself, to King Abgar V of Edessa. Maniakes delivered it to Romanos as a trophy along with an annual tribute of fifty pounds of gold.

“I have seen him [Maniakes] myself, and was amazed, for nature gave him all the qualities of a man destined to command,” wrote Psellos, describing him in almost mythical terms: ten feet tall, voice like thunder, strong enough to topple walls and shake brass gates, quick as a lion, with a terrible scowl. “All the barbarians lived in fear of him, some because they had seen him in the flesh, others because they had heard dreadful stories of his abilities.”

Maniakes, whom for unknown reasons the Varangians nicknamed Gyrgir, was embarking on an illustrious, though checkered, military career, one that would heavily involve, influence and conflict with Harald’s. For his part the Varangian, on joining Maniakes’ command, was not in the least intimidated. According to Snorri, the two leaders were soon butting heads.

As he tells it, one night the Varangians were pitching their tents along a coast or lake when Maniakes decided he wanted their site for his camp, and ordered them to pull up stakes. Harald told him, “If you arrive in camp first, you choose your ground, and we must pitch our tents where we can. Now it is your turn, so go find a site of your own. It is our privilege, as Varangians in the land of the Greek emperor and free men, to choose our own commanders, and serve the emperor and empress alone.”

“The argument escalated,” reported Snorri, “until finally they grabbed their weapons and were about to trade blows.”

Before things went too far, cooler heads prevailed on the leaders to settle it by drawing lots, not just for this occasion but for all such conflicts going forward. Both agreed. Maniakes marked his piece, but Harald said, “Let me see the mark you made on your lot, so we do not mark both of them the

same."

Both lots were put in a box. A judge picked one at random and held it up. "The holder of this lot shall lead on the march and at sea, and have pride of place in harbor and in the camp."

Harald grabbed his hand, snatched the piece, and threw it into the water. "That," he told the Varangians, "was our lot!"

Maniakes said, "Why not let everyone see it?"

Harald replied, "Why bother? The one in the box has your mark on it." Sure enough, the remaining lot bore Maniakes' mark. Since the piece first chosen must then have been Harald's, the Varangians would get first pick in everything.

Of course Harald had marked his piece the same as Maniakes, and everybody knew it, but nobody could prove it. Winning by guile counted the same as winning by luck. It was the kind of cleverness Norsemen admired, and apparently even Maniakes respected. This would not be the last time, however, that the two leaders crossed paths. "They had many arguments," recorded Snorri, "but Harald always got his way."

The sagas admit that Harald declined to give the *strategos* his full support in battle, with the excuse of avoiding casualties among the Varangians, only giving his all when they could win the glory. In this way he received credit for victory while Maniakes took the blame for defeats. Eventually, according to Snorri, it got to the point that the Varangians demanded Harald be put in overall command, until finally Maniakes told him and his men to begone. "So Harald now left the main army, taking the Varangians with him."

Byzantine sources give other reasons for the split. Ability on the battlefield counted less than blood relation to Emperor Michael and his eunuch brother John. They appointed another brother, Constantine Katallakos, as *doux* (duke, commander of several themes) of Antioch. This worthy was, if anything, even lower birth than the rest of the family. "A professional beggar," sniffed the 12th-century historian Michael Glykas, "he grew close to the emperor [Romanos] through his brother John." That hadn't stopped Constantine from profiting by the emperor's murder, as the *Orphanotrophos* titled him to estates confiscated from noblemen purged after the change of power. Glykas' contemporary, the Byzantine chronicler Constantine Manasses, summed up Katallakos as "a bad-tempered, ignorant, vile and sinister man."

Yet of all the imperial brothers, Constantine, who like John was a eunuch,

harbored a poisonous envy of the *Orphanotrophos*, for as Psellos put it, John "was more their master than their brother." That may be why he became close to Romanos, and also why John sent him to faraway Antioch. At any rate, Constantine evidently did not wish to compete with the likes of Maniakes, who in the Byzantine chain of command still outranked Harald. Maniakes was transferred out of Edessa. Its governorship was handed to one Leo Lependrenos, according to Matthew of Edessa a former Armenian tent-guard, whose tales of treachery and Arab fighting prowess had frightened Romanos back to Constantinople.

All this worked in Harald's favor. Ex-sentry Lependrenos, no military genius, had more need of Varangians and less authority, either official or moral, than Maniakes over their commander. And Harald's relationship, to whatever extent he had one, with Empress Zoe made him valuable to Constantine.

There still remained the problem of Berkri. With neither Constantine nor Lependrenos inclined to action, the task fell to the patrician and veteran *strategos* Niketas Pegonites. In 1018, when Basil II still ruled, Pegonites had stood off a Bulgarian siege of Dyrrachion, a key bulwark of the western empire on the Adriatic coast, killing the Bulgar king in a counterattack and putting an end to the war. Now he would prove that he could conduct a siege as well as repel one, for with all their pieces arranged it was time for the Byzantines to resume the offensive. According to Aristakes, "Moving the siege machinery into place, they commenced demolishing the city wall."

In 1976 a 7.3-magnitude earthquake centered on Muradiye killed almost 160 people and leveled nearly every building in the city. Heavy earthen roofs on spindly wooden struts and walls of rubble masonry with mud mortar proved too vulnerable to shock. Anatolian construction techniques and materials having changed hardly at all over the intervening millennium, the walls of Berkri would have responded little better to catapulted boulders and fireballs. Pegonites contented himself with pounding the defenses to dust before sending in his troops. Skylitzes summarized the strategy: "He conducted a lengthy siege with Varangians and other Roman units and eventually took the town by storm."

Taking towns by storm was more Harald's style. As the dust roiled before

broken gates and fallen walls, the Varangians shouldered through the wreckage and brought down the wrath of God and the emperor on the heathen. If the denizens of Berkri had ever heard stories of the emperor's giant Northmen, they now learned the truth of it. Danish axes hacked scimitar-swinging swordsmen. The streets of Berkri ran red with blood again. Aliem and his son were both slain. The remaining defenders locked themselves inside the citadel but, seeing no escape, offered surrender for mercy.

In his *Taktika* Emperor Leo had encouraged magnanimity as a battle stratagem – for if enemies had no hope of receiving it, they would fight to the death – and Pegonites followed the manual. According to Aristakes, the garrison was permitted to march out to their own lands, "and from that day forward the dominion of the Saracens over the town was finished."

So Berkri was Byzantine again, but the rest of the upper Euphrates was still up for grabs. With Maniakes out of their way, in December of 1036 the Saracens staged a comeback, as Matthew of Edessa recorded:

> The Arabs advanced on Edessa with a great army. They crossed the great Euphrates River and subjected the land to slavery and the sword. Many Christians were taken as prisoners to the Saracen lands. They destroyed Alar and Sewerak [modern Siverek] and filled all fountains and irrigation ditches with blood. The devastation was so great that the country ran with the blood of Christians.

The Saracens laid siege to Edessa, drove Lependrenos and his Byzantine garrison inside the citadel and were on the verge of taking the city when the *doux* Constantine led a relief force from Antioch – at least, part of the way. Matthew reported, "With a great cavalry force he reached the city of Melitene [modern Malatya]. However, he became frightened and would not seek battle against the Saracens."

Luckily, fate intervened. Before Constantine was forced to actually commit himself to win or lose, the Saracens gave up the siege and went home. "The Byzantine troops did the same. They did not dare enter the land of the Saracens. Instead they returned home in peace. On the way they looted the wealth of Christians worse than the Saracens had."

No source specifically states Varangians, much less Harald, were part of this erstwhile relief effort, but the Varangians were an elite fighting force, the fighting was at Melitene, and the mention of Byzantine troops looting their own people has a very Viking ring to it. "Harald gained victory and loot wherever he fought," records *King Harald's Saga*. "He built up his army, and

captured eighty towns, some by surrender, and others by storm."

The question remains as to why the Saracens did not put Constantine to the test of battle at Edessa. The answer is, events in faraway Cairo had suddenly taken precedence over any petty squabbles on the frontier of Anatolia, events that would affect and ultimately shape Harald's rise to fame and power.

In June 1036 Ali az-Zahir, the seventh caliph of the Fatimid dynasty, died of plague just short of his thirty-sixth birthday. The caliphate passed to his son, Ma'ad al-Mustansir Billah, who was just short of his seventh birthday. A circle of advisors ruled in the boy's name, led by the vizier Ali ibn Ahmad al-Jarjara'i. It would be easy to say the vizier had his hands full with running the caliphate, except that in 1013 al-Mustansir's grandfather, the "Mad Caliph" al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, had cut off both his hands in a blind rage. Still, the Berber, Turkish and African slave-mercenaries in the Fatimid army, the *ghoulam* (who also included small numbers of free Rus and Scandinavians), were as inclined to fight each other as the enemy, and the western provinces of the empire, Sicily and Tunisia, were on the verge of breaking away. With the caliphate in transition, al-Jarjara'i would have been smart to call most of his troops home to have them handy in case some of them rebelled.

With the Saracen threat in at least temporary abeyance, Harald too was recalled. According to Snorri, "he returned to Constantinople with his men and stayed there for some time." His arrival in the capital confirms that in just a year or so he had indeed risen high in the ranks of the Varangians. His exploits against the Saracens had proven his loyalty to the empire. Maniakes wanted rid of him, and the *strategos* Constantine may have recommended him to his brothers Michael and John, who needed a commander the Varangians would reliably follow. There was no threat of rebellion in the capital, but the games among the aristocracy were being played for deadly stakes again. Like al-Jarjara'i, some of them no doubt desired loyal troops close at hand, not least Zoe herself.

Things at the palace were going downhill for the empress. In his thirst for power the *Orphanotrophos* was not content with the office of prime minister. His mutilation barred him from the imperial throne, but not the patriarchal

throne of the Church of Constantinople. As patriarch he would rank as first of equals among the archbishops of the empire. With John ruling the church and Michael ruling the state, the power of the Paphlagonians would be supreme. The patriarch Alexios, who had initially balked at presiding over the sham wedding of Zoe and Michael, had also set himself at odds with the landed gentry, who had been buying up neglected church properties in the name of restoring them to full use, but actually just to increase their own holdings. John had conspired with some of the lesser archbishops and metropolitans to have Alexios removed, on the grounds that he had not been elected by the bishops but appointed by Emperor Basil II, which was true. But Alexios pointed out that if his ordination was invalid, so was that of the three emperors he had crowned, as well as half the bishops and metropolitans, including most of those conspiring with the *Orphanotrophos*. John had to back down.

Realizing at last that the eunuch was an impediment not only to her desire for Michael, but to the empire itself, Zoe undertook a little conspiracy of her own, to have him killed. She learned that he was taking a purgative – in those days a common enough, if errant and ineffective, method of treating a whole host of maladies. Taking advantage of one of her few remaining weapons – her immense wealth – she bribed one of her eunuchs to in turn bribe John's physician to slip poison into his medicine. The doctor's servant, however, tipped off the *Orphanotrophos* to the plot before it could be implemented. The doctor was banished from the city, and though Zoe was not implicated, as Skylitzes reported, "the empress came under more and more suspicion."

Harald had nothing to do with this incident (or at least his name has never come up in connection with it), but he was nevertheless becoming a piece in the palace games. If it came to a fight with the Paphlagonians, Zoe would need to tempt some troops over to her side. It was getting to the point where Harald would have to choose loyalty to the emperor or the empress, but before his ultimate fealty could be put to the test, events in the land of the Saracens again took precedence.

It was not war, but peace that upset the status quo. The handless Fatimid vizier al-Jarjara'i was not interested in fighting Byzantium. In 1027, as vizier to az-Zahir, he had negotiated a truce with Constantine VIII, and in 1037, as

vizier to al-Mustansir, he negotiated a thirty-year peace with Michael IV. Included in the treaty, along with a prisoner exchange (5,000 Muslims released, and 50,000 Christians), was permission for the Byzantines to rebuild the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, which the Mad Caliph had destroyed in 1009 – the act which, decades later, would still serve as a leading excuse for the First Crusade.

On this momentous occasion a delegation of architects, carpenters, stonemasons and other craftsmen was assembled to visit the Holy City, to be accompanied by priests and bishops and aristocrats eager to make the pilgrimage. They were to be escorted by the Varangian Guard.

Since lesser nobles did not rate the imperial bodyguard, this indicates that at least some of the delegates were of regal status. If Emperor Michael had made the trip it would have been a state visit, an historic event, recorded as such. It was not. None of the Byzantines of the delegation have so much as been named (or if they were, the records have been lost). But there were only three other people in the empire worthy of Varangian protectors. At this time both Zoe's older sister Eudokia and her younger sister Theodora were nuns, and might have been candidates for a religious pilgrimage-slash-political mission, but neither was in good standing with the palace. Eudokia had never played a political role and Theodora, more or less banished to the nunnery, was no friend of the throne. So it is not unrealistic to surmise that, as representative of the state, the empress herself made the trip. The blood of a Porphyrogenita was, after all, more royal than any man's. Furthermore, Zoe had every reason to want out of Constantinople, and her husband and his scheming brother had every reason to see her go. Having survived her assassination attempt, John was too smart to think he could banish the empress, even to a nunnery. She still had the people's love, and in her absence the adoration of the crowd would quickly turn to the vengeance of the mob. But if she went *willingly*….

For Zoe a trip to to the Holy City would raise no suspicion. For all her foibles the Augusta had a reputation, true or otherwise, for piety. "In this she surpassed all others, both women and men," admitted Psellos. "Her fervent reverence for all things pertaining to God had really put her in touch, so to speak, with the First and Purest Light. Certainly there was never a time when the she did not evince the name of God."

A cynic would note that Zoe had a lot of sins to repent, and that false piety

is often the mark of a hypocrite. At any rate, a voyage to the Holy Land was not an opportunity the empress would have missed, if only to escape her imprisonment in the palace. Michael and John would have been only too glad to see her off, probably even hoping that she would suffer some mishap and never return. And as extra incentive, why not assign her favorite Varangian to her security detail?

The sagas are explicit that Harald himself went on the journey, though it gets only a page or two of coverage – just enough to set a precedent, to be followed by later Norse kings like Knut IV of Denmark and Sigurd I of Norway. The scribes do, however, have the dates rather obviously mixed up, placing the trip after some of Harald's later exploits, which goes against the actual historical record. Probably the earliest skalds got it wrong and later writers, including Snorri, had no way of catching the error and passed it along. But Harald's capabilities in a fight and his recently gained familiarity with Saracen ways, coupled with the high regard in which he was held among the Varangians – and the empress – made him eminently qualified for elevation to the imperial bodyguard, especially for escort duty to Jerusalem. The *Orphanotrophos*, who as Psellos mentions never missed a trick, would have seen him as the perfect bait to lure Zoe away.

And Harald had his own reasons to visit the Levant. According to the *Morkinskinna*, he "wished to atone for his offenses against God."

VIII

Holy Land

The very adventurous lord set out from the Greeks,
Daring with his sword to subjugate Jerusalem.
The country submitted to the warrior.
And because of his formidable power
The land was delivered as his gift,
Unburned, to the conqueror.

Stuf Thordarson, the Blind

According to Arab sources, the peace treaty between Cairo and Constantinople was finalized in October 1037. As their expedition was in part a religious pilgrimage, the Byzantines would have striven to reach the Holy Land by Christmas of that year, or at the latest a few weeks into 1038 – to Western churches, the time of the Epiphany, the visit of the Magi to Christ's birth, but to Eastern churches the Theophany, his baptism. Overland routes from Constantinople to Jerusalem through Anatolia, Syria and the bandit-infested desert would have taken months. Byzantium, though, was a maritime empire, and had largely swept the seas clear of the pirates, so it is most likely the imperial mission was conducted over water.

Since the days of Emperor Leo VI the Wise (r. 886–912) two royal galleys for the emperor's pleasure, and for the empress a pair of barges, were kept on standby in the palace's private artificial harbor, the Boucoleon. Naval *dromones* would be enlisted as escorts. No expense would be spared on a junket meant in part to impress the Fatimids. By all accounts Harald took

advantage of imperial largesse. According to Snorri, “He left in store all the gold he had earned from the Byzantine Emperor, and so did all the Varangians who accompanied him.”

On a voyage of a little less than two weeks, a fleet from Constantinople could transit the Dardanelles Strait and Sea of Marmara, bumping along the Anatolian coast, making numerous overnight stops and layovers to dodge bad weather and take on supplies: Ephesus, Samos, Kos, Rhodes, Myra, others. Lower-class passengers, billeted below decks, battled seasickness and close proximity to each other, subsisting on dried fish, eggs, cheese and *biscotti*, biscuits twice-baked to be nearly imperishable, softened by dipping in watered-down wine. Up top, aristocrats enjoyed fresh local delicacies, the sea breeze, and Mediterranean sunsets as they lazed about in the captain’s quarters under a raised awning on the aft deck. A Varangian guardsman experienced both worlds, one on duty, the other off. Unless, of course, a Porphyrogenita took personal interest in his accommodations….

Finally came the hop over to Cyprus, and from there, avoiding the Syrian coast (for the Fatimids still had to contend with the Bedouin and other rebellious tribes in the north, and though the caliph had decreed peace, it would be inviting trouble to let such a rich convoy be sighted close to heathen shores), straight across the Levantine Sea to Jaffa, the old port of modern Tel Aviv. This was where Perseus had rescued Andromeda from Poseidon’s sea monster, Cetus; where the prophet Jonah had taken ship to avoid God’s will, for which he was swallowed by a whale; and where the Apostle Peter raised the widow Dorcas from the dead. The city was said to have been founded by Noah’s son Yafet after the Flood. If, however, the pilgrims were expecting to set foot ashore in a biblical paradise, they were in for a shock.

Once this had been the Byzantine Diocese of the East, but now it was Muslim country, the *jund Filastin* – Palestine – a province of *Bilad al-Sham*, the Land of the North, Syria. The Palestinian geographer Shams al-Din al-Muqaddasi, called the Jerusalemite, had written, “Yafah [Jaffa], on the coast, is only a small town, although the main port of Palestine and Ar-Ramlah [Ramla]. It is protected by an unassailable fortress, with iron gates, and the sea-gates also are iron. The mosque is beautiful, overlooking the sea. The harbor is superb.”

However, he had written that a few decades in the past. In December of

1033, while religious pilgrims in Jerusalem celebrated Christ's birth a millennium after his death, a month-long series of devastating earthquakes, which modern scientists rate at up to X (extreme damage) on the Mercalli intensity scale, had devastated the Jordan Valley.

Setting out at dawn on hired camels, a caravan moved over a shattered landscape of tumbled walls, deserted villages and destitute inhabitants struggling to rebuild. A day's march inland travelers arrived at the provincial capital, Ar-Ramlah, on the Via Maris, the old Roman road from Cairo to Damascus – or what was left of it. A third of the city, including its famed mosque of white marble, had been shaken to the ground, and the rest had been temporarily abandoned. (In 1068 the city would suffer another quake, from which it never fully recovered.) Rebuilding was slow, even for the rich, and if no rooms could be found under roof, travelers pitched tents among ruins. Any villagers fingering curved daggers and looking covetously upon the luxurious goods and comforts of the Byzantine caravan and its idle passengers lazing around their fires, averted their eyes and scuttled off like rats under the gaze of the axe-wielding guardsmen and their fierce, blond-haired leader. Harald would have been in no mood to tolerate thieves. Body-guarding superiors, especially females, was a task utterly unfamiliar to him. As a prince, he had been attended by his own guards. As a soldier, he was inclined to take what he wanted. As a man, he had known few women not at his beck and call. Restraint did not come naturally to a warrior such as him.

And perhaps, on the eve of arrival in the holiest city of Christendom, lying awake and listening to the Norwegian and his men trudging their rounds in the sand just outside their tents, certain imperial emissaries' thoughts were not entirely pure either.

From Ar-Ramlah, Jerusalem was another day's march and a half-mile climb up from sea level. Leaving at dawn, by mid-afternoon the travelers crested the peak the Crusaders would name Mountjoy, where stands the modern West Bank village of Nabi Samwil around the tomb of the prophet Samuel, built by the Byzantines in the days when this was still part of their empire. From this vantage point pilgrims got their first glimpse of the walls and hills of the Holy City, some three leagues, seven miles, to the south. Like the Crusaders would, the more devout among the Christians no doubt fell to their

knees in religious ecstasy. Some of their Norse guards, however, must have recalled none-too-distant ancestors who worshipped another father-god, and perhaps still wore about their necks amulets of Thor's hammer, fashioned in the shape of a cross. Sighting Muslim minarets rising in the distance, they might be excused for wondering if it was Yahweh, or Allah, or Odin looking down on them.

From here the way was lined with altars, crosses and standing stones marking religious sites: Anata, birthplace of the prophet Jeremiah; Ein Karem, where the Virgin Mother visited Elisabeth, mother of John the Baptist; Emmaus, where the Lord appeared to two of his disciples after his death and resurrection. Every step the pilgrims took was upon ground once trodden by saints.

At the end of the day the procession arrived at the Jaffa Gate, the Pilgrims Gate, on the west side of the city. Above them rose the walls of the Citadel and the Tower of David, what the Byzantines mistakenly called the remains of King Herod's Roman-era palace. (It is hard to say what Herod's palace looked like in 1037, as it had already been destroyed and rebuilt at least once, and would be again, so that today almost nothing but the tower remains.) After their two-day march the travelers would save visiting the holy sites for the morning. The Saracen governor Anushtakin al-Dizbari normally ruled Syria from Damascus, but whether or not the Byzantines' arrival in Jerusalem merited his personal attendance, his minions and representatives—perhaps Fath al-Qal'i, the former slave-soldier who had risen to govern Jerusalem up to at least 1030—would have seen to it that the newcomers were made welcome in the Arab tradition of effusive hospitality. To this day the common greeting among the desert peoples, even for total strangers, is a cold fruit drink, *sharab*, and the assurance they have arrived in a land of plenty, no matter how poor the actual setting: *ahlan wa sahlan*, a short way of saying, "you have descended on your own people and have stepped [from the desert] upon the plains."

As a commander among the Guard, Harald would have attended the welcome feast, and as a prince of the far north (for though the *Morkinskinna* claims he still went by the alias Nordbrikt, according to Byzantine accounts after these few years in imperial service his real identity was hardly a secret), there's a high probability he was even granted a place at the table. He was already familiar with Arab cuisine from his Anatolian days, but a state dinner

would have included delicacies few Norsemen ever savored, and in great quantity.

Medieval Arabic recipe books survive in abundance. Traditional dining involved a wide variety of dishes, and plenty of them. First, a *meze*, up to forty choices of *hors d'oeuvres*—nuts and dried seeds, fruits and vegetables, cheeses and salads, squid and octopus, bone marrow and liver, all washed down with licorice-tasting *arak*, "the milk of lions," distilled from grapes and aniseed oil, clear until mixed with water, in which it turns translucent white. (The Fatimids, being an Isma'ilist sect, frowned upon but did not forbid alcohol.)

Then came the main courses. Perhaps *tharida*, a soup made of bread crumbled into broth, accented with egg or bone marrow. Lamb chops, kebabs of chicken and beef. Or *bazmaward*, a cheese sandwich with nuts, mushrooms, and eggs. *Sikbaj*, lamb stewed in vinegar and served cold. Lebanese wine. *Harisa*, today a hot pepper paste popular in North Africa, but in medieval times meat stewed with whole wheat and butter, whipped into a savory porridge. More *arak*. *Buraniyya*, fried eggplant slices with garlic, caraway, and soy sauce. Shiraz wine from Persia. *Burri*, fermented barley sauce. *Kamakh ahmar*, a kind of salty blue cheese spread, though reddish-brown in color and with the unfortunate appearance of horse dung. Rich Arabic coffee and tea. Sugar-coated almonds, candies and preserves. Yet more *arak*.

For entertainment – of more interest to the men at the table than to aristocratic ladies – exotic Arab girls might perform the *baladi*, the traditional Egyptian dance (though in traditional, modest, full-length dress with long sleeves; the midriff-baring bra tops and harem pants on today's belly dancers are a late-1800s invention to titillate Victorian audiences). And there was a new board game out of the East, only just becoming popular in southern Europe, which the Persians called *shatranj*. The board – eight by eight alternating black and light squares, with pieces representing infantry, cavalry, elephants, chariots and even royalty, each with their own moves – presented an opportunity for an ordinary fighting man to play *strategos*, which surely appealed to Harald. It would be a hundred or more years, though, before *shatranj* began to evolve into modern chess.

All the while translators would warn the visitors that to not eat – and beyond that, to not eat *more* – was to offend their hosts. Yet according to the

laws of hospitality, the best delicacies were reserved for guests, so in the course of things the visitors must have been offered sheep eyes.

Among Arabs, eyes are eaten whole. When bitten they're a little crispy (they're not eaten raw), a little rubbery, poppable, jelly-filled. If offered, it is hard to believe Harald would not accept the challenge and down a few just to impress his hosts and feminine charges. After all, as a Norwegian, he was no stranger to dishes that stared back. In Norway *smalehovud*, half a sheep's head, boiled, is a holiday dish. Icelanders call it *svid*, and the entire half-face – the cheek, ear, nose and eye – is for eating. (Except the brains – Icelanders draw the line at brains.)

But Harald, or at least Halldor and Ulf, could top that. Icelandic *hakarl* is shark, gutted, buried, and left for weeks to ferment, then dug up and hung to dry for months more before ready for eating. The smell alone is said to gag first-timers. Icelanders take it in small cubes, as a test of virility.

Over such stories, and meals, and drinks, are enemies made into friends. The warriors of the snowy North, the people of the sea, and the nomads of the desert shared bread and salt. "*As-salamu 'alaykum*" ("peace be upon you") was answered "*wa 'alaykumu s-salam*" ("and on you be peace"). The details are, of course, uncertain, but we do know the pact between empire and caliphate was well and truly sealed.

Whether or not he took part in the feast, Harald's head must have been spinning, and not just from the *arak*, as he laid it on his pillow that night. Just a few years earlier he had been lying near death on a Scandinavian battlefield, yet here he was, in the palace of the holiest city in Christendom, hobnobbing with leaders of the world's two greatest empires. Surely some god or another was looking over his shoulder.

With the morning light came the reckoning.

On top of regretting, and possibly regurgitating, some of the *arak* and all that strange and spicy food, the imperial emissaries and their guards had to prepare themselves for a state occasion, imbued with pomp and ritual. Some of the ordinary artisans and craftsmen among the delegation may have hurried ahead to begin inspecting the work site, but the dignitaries would have taken the slower, more spiritually meaningful, politically symbolic route: the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Sorrow, the path Christ took to his

crucifixion.

The route has changed over the centuries. Today processions begin at the Lions' Gate, St. Stephen's Gate, in the Muslim Quarter on the east side of the Old City. In Harald's day the way began further east, in the Garden of Gethsemane, before joining the current route. (Modern scholars believe, with good reason, that Christ's actual journey began on the other side of the city, at Herod's Palace itself, but that's now an inauspicious parking lot in the Armenian Quarter. Religious tradition takes precedence.)

The Byzantines wound through narrow streets already a thousand years old, looked down upon by curious Muslim families from atop strange flat-roofed houses, through markets and bazaars hawking food, cloth, jewelry and craftwork. (To this day the Via Dolorosa is lined with souvenir shops.) A millennium ago, the modern stops commemorating waypoints from the trial by Pilate to the placing of Christ's body in the tomb had not yet been designated. Many are not even mentioned in the Gospels but have simply become traditional. Christian guides – for there were many Christians in the Holy City, who had been permitted to recant their forced conversion to Islam – pointed out the various way stations: where Jesus was condemned; where he took up the cross; the places he stumbled and fell along the way.

Meanwhile the Byzantines began to realize just how much work lay ahead of them in Jerusalem. The city walls themselves had taken damage in the great quakes. Prior to their arrival the Saracens had been pulling down Christian churches for stone to use in repairs of the wall and their own mosques, and had even considered dismantling the Church of Zion, a Jewish–Christian church/synagogue dating back to the Roman era. As a millennium earlier, a feeling of foreboding surely descended upon the Christians as the procession reached its destination at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the site of the Crucifixion, just outside the inner city wall constructed in the 1st century BC (but within the outer city wall built a hundred years later). On their arrival at the site, they found only tragedy on top of tragedy – not just what the Romans had done to their Christ, but what the Mad Caliph's Saracens had done to his shrine.

The magnificent church completed on the site by the emperor Constantine I 700 years earlier had once covered three and a half acres. The Greek Archbishop Eusebius of Caesarea, who attended its building, wrote, "The emperor erected this temple as a grandiose monument to the Savior's

resurrection, and embellished it throughout on an imperial scale of magnificence. He further enriched it with uncounted offerings of inexpressible beauty and various materials: gold, silver, and precious stones…."

All that remained were ruins. In 1009 the Christian physician and historian Yahya ibn Sa'id of Antioch witnessed the destruction. He wrote, "The Saracens seized everything they found in the church and obliterated it all, leaving only that which was too difficult to destroy. They also demolished Calvary and the Church of St. Constantine and everything inside them, and they even tried to do away with the holy remains." They had knocked down every wall and pillar, fired the stone of the Holy Tomb and hammered the very rock to rubble. Anything that remained was covered by debris. By the time the earthquakes of 1033–34 hit, there had been nothing left to fall. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher would have to be rebuilt from the ground up.

The offense must have sorely tested the new friendship between Byzantine and Saracen. Yet what was done was done, and almost thirty years past. Hardly anyone who had taken part in the demolition of 1009 would have still been around in 1038 (and if they had, they would have been smart to avoid taking part in this procession). Harald and his men had not come to take vengeance, but to protect their charges and obey their orders. There was nothing for it but to keep weapons sheathed, help weeping ladies to their feet, and leave the artisans to begin their work. The reconstruction would not be complete for ten years.

According to Snorri, "Harald generously gave donations to the shrine at the grave of Our Lord, the Holy Cross, and other holy sites in Palestine," and the *Morkinskinna* says, "he gave so much gold that no one knows the amount." Both conveniently forget that Harald had left his own gold in Constantinople, but this would not be the only act of virtue for which he would rightly or wrongly receive credit.

Nor was the Church of the Holy Sepulcher the only holy site in the Levant. Not even five miles down the Hebron road from Jerusalem was the Church of the Holy Nativity in Bethlehem, sheltering the grotto where Christ was born. It had not only survived the Arab conquest but also the Mad Caliph's anger. The pilgrims surely made the short journey to worship there.

But anyone seeking to cleanse themselves of sin could still do so where Christ himself did… if they were willing to break a few commandments in

getting there.

A caravan headed northeast from the Holy City would pick its way almost 3,800 feet down steep escarpments and jagged ravines into the deepest valley in the world, that of the Jordan River, which for the seventy-five miles from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea runs below sea level. Today the river marks an uneasy border with Jordan, a country not always hostile to Israel, but often a haven of terrorists, and so it was in Harald's day. The plain to the east was the territory of the Jarrahids, an Arab tribe who decades earlier had rebelled against Cairo and even proclaimed their own caliph. They had been subdued, but as peace between the empires was not to their advantage, they had since then played off the Byzantines against the Fatimids, taking one side and then the other in the Anatolian wars. The region was also plagued by nomadic Bedouin raiders and bandits, as well as the *ahdath*, local militia who used their power to lord it over the villages. A trip into these lands was not without risk and not to be undertaken lightly. Harald and his Varangians did not go looking for a fight, but according to the sagas, on this trip the fight came to them.

Defending a camel train was another new kind of warfare for Norsemen, but their Arab guides and escorts had been fighting such battles for centuries. (The annual winter caravan from Mecca to Damascus, numbering 2,000–3,000 animals with a cargo worth around $450,000 in today's money, stood off constant attacks.) Tactics had changed little. Bandits would not wait for the caravan to reach its destination and settle into a fortified camp, but descend on it while the animals were strung out nose to tail over a mile or more, with the goal of cutting off and capturing half the train before the rest could even enter the fight. The likeliest spot for an attack was near the destination, where the caravaneers might be tempted to make a run for it instead of immediately preparing a defense.

The *daleel*, the guide, rode far out ahead to scout the way. If he spotted trouble, the caravan captain riding in the lead unfurled his flag to warn those behind. The camel drivers whipped their beasts into a circle, tore the cargoes off their backs and forced them down inside the improvised rampart, or as part of the rampart. Everyone, Christian and Muslim alike, down to the lowliest porter, found a weapon and prepared to fight to the death.

In such a situation, much as they might want to, the Varangians could not ride out to attack, leaving their charges unprotected. Within the circle, they would form their own shield wall, with the aristocrats inside. A Porphyrogenita, sheltered all her life, would be useless in a fight. Little good it would do to put a weapon in her hands, except possibly a dagger to use on herself if the outcome went badly.

Camels and fleet Arabian steeds churned a whirlwind of dust around the caravan as the enemy riders rained arrows into the center, seeking any weakness in the defenses. A gap in the circle, or even a few dead defenders leaving a spot unguarded, left an opening for the bandits to exploit. Once inside they could hack down the defenders from behind, or force them to turn their backs to more attackers outside.

But these marauders of the southern desert would never have encountered a shield wall of Varangian guardsmen. A Dane axe that could behead a horse could do the same to a camel, and a screaming Bedouin died under it just as easily as a Pole, or a Pecheneg, or a rebel Norseman.

At some point this attack failed. The surviving marauders regrouped and rode off to seek easier prey. As the dust settled, wounded caravaneers were tended, wounded animals put out of their misery, and wounded bandits dispatched – slowly, for purposes of vengeance and entertainment.

The Varangians saw to their charges. Seeing scattered heads and limbs, guts spilled on the sand, and blood spattered on silken gowns was not the same thing as watching, from the comfort of the *Kathisma*, criminals being blinded in the Hippodrome, or ordering an old man drowned in his bathtub. And if we can't be absolutely certain which imperials the Varangians protected on this trip, we can at least be positive that none of them died in the Holy Land. Harald saw to that, and Snorri boiled it all down to one sentence: "He cleared a road all the way to the Jordan River, killing all the bandits and other miscreants around."

A day's march from Jerusalem, the pilgrims arrived at Qasr el Yahud, "the Castle of the Jews," 1,270 feet below sea level, in a winding valley lined with palm and tamarisk trees, rhododendron and Sodom apple, with a Byzantine-built church as the nominative castle. Here the Israelites, after forty years in the wilderness, had crossed into the Promised Land. Here the prophet Elijah

had ascended to heaven in a chariot of fire, and his student Elisha performed miracles. After the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and Church of the Nativity, Qasr el Yahud is the holiest place in Christendom, where Christ received his own absolution from sin from John the Baptist and began his ministry. Arabs call their side of the river al-Maghtas, “baptism.”

As with the Red Sea on their exodus from Egypt, Israelites supposedly could not cross the Jordan until it was parted with the Ark of the Covenant, but today the river is bled nearly dry by pumping stations and irrigation channels upstream. At Qasr el Yahud it is little more than a gully full of sluggish brown water only a few yards wide, tainted with agricultural run-off and local sewage. International borders notwithstanding, if one wishes it could be crossed, thankfully, without wetting one’s head.

No responsible military commander would camp on one bank of such a ford without first clearing the far side of hostiles and posting sentries there as well. At some point Harald, having crossed the river, reined up his horse and had a look out across the Jordanian plain. Beyond it lay Persia, India and nameless faraway lands that had known no Western conqueror since the days of Alexander. It was as far east as Harald would ever get in his life, for here he turned back. In the sagas the skald Stuf Thordarson the Blind, who knew Harald in later years and tended to wax lyrical for his benefit, specifically stated he “proclaimed justice on both banks of the Jordan,” probably an overly glorious way of saying he secured his camp perimeter.

Since infant baptism had been standard Christian practice for centuries, the Byzantines on the trip, including the Varangians, were already sanctified. This was still more than a decade before the Great Schism between the churches of Rome and Constantinople, and questions of leavened or unleavened bread for communion, whether icons were worthy of worship, celibate priests and other such differences were of more import to the clergy than the laity. Yet the Byzantine aristocracy did nothing without pomp and ritual. If a Porphyrogenita wished so much as to dip a toe in the holy river it would be done according to some or another complex ceremony, with an entourage of attendants, observed and consecrated by bishops, probably accompanied by a choir, and watched over by the Varangian Guard.

When duty was done, though, came the opportunity to walk in Christ’s

footsteps. Of this Snorri wrote simply, “Harald went to the Jordan and bathed in the water, in the manner of all pilgrims.”

The Jordan Valley remains warmer in winter than the surrounding uplands, but in the early weeks of a new year the river is at its coldest – a bracing 60°F (15°C). An empress from a long line of warm-weather Greeks would find it bone-numbing. To a Norseman from the land of fjords, on the other hand, it would feel like a little taste of home. Something to make a man think.

The Muslims believed in *wudu* and *ghusl*, ritual ablutions in preparation for worship. The Eastern Christians believed any ordinary believer could perform baptism, no priest required. If a man uttered a prayer and submerged himself three times in honor of the Holy Trinity, when he arose again from the water was his soul cleansed and were all his sins absolved? Avarice? Fornication? Killing his fellow man – murder in the name of God?

Surviving when his brother was slain. Turning his back on his own royal duty to his people. Running away to serve foreign lords.

There’s no record that Harald received any sort of answer, or had any sort of epiphany, or even so much as questioned his destiny. The ancients did not interpret events in that manner, and their skalds did not record it in such terms. The Muslims believed all was fated, all was preordained, there was no such thing as free will. The old-time pagan Vikings believed that although the Fates wove their futures only the moment of death was predestined, that everything leading to it was up to the man. Harald the Christian was not so far removed from that.

God had seen fit to raise him this far. Only God knew how much further he might yet rise.

And let not God stand in his way, if Harald aspired to a crown of his own.

IX

SICILY

The ship sliced the sea before broad Sicily.
We were proud then.
Swift as a forest stag it glided,
Bearing a warrior crew.
It is not for a laggard
To ever attempt such a voyage.

Harald Sigurdsson

Just a few months later, in the summer of 1038, Harald stood at the other end of the Byzantine Empire, on the very toe of the Italian boot, looking out over another stretch of water lying between him and his destiny. The Strait of Messina between Italy and Sicily was wider than the Jordan River, but not by much. At its narrowest, a channel less than two miles across was all that separated Christianity and Islam. And this time, Harald would not cross the waters in the name of peace, but as a prelude to war. He and up to a thousand Varangians were assigned to the army again, part of an invasion force of as many as 10,000 imperial soldiers and mercenaries, sent to undertake the liberation – the reconquest – of Sicily.

Emperor Michael and John the *Orphanotrophos* had dispatched an imperial fleet to bear the army over the water. Rigging and wood hulls creaked, sails billowed, and oars swept the waves. The tides between the Tyrrhenian Sea to the north and the Ionian Sea to the south create such powerful currents through the strait that Charybdis, the fearsome ship-eating whirlpool monster

said to live there, appeared in the legends of the Trojans, Odysseus, and Jason and the Argonauts. Even so, speeding *dromones* would cross the narrow strait in mere minutes.

Messina has a magnificent natural port, hemmed on two sides by a peninsula supposedly fashioned by Orion himself, the son of Poseidon. Still, it was a bit small to contain a fleet of perhaps fifty ships at once – oared galleys have a much wider footprint than pure sailing vessels – and some historians assert the Byzantines landed about ten miles up the coast, on the wide, long beach at Pelorus, modern Faro Point on the extreme northeastern tip of Sicily. This would allow the entire fleet to land and the army to disembark simultaneously, including their horses, sufficiently out of sight of the town but within a march of only a few hours.

Toward the end of the 11th century the monk and historian Geoffrey Malaterra, serving in the monastery of St. Agatha in Sicily, heard of the battle of Messina, probably from Normans who had fought there as mercenaries in the imperial army. “The citizens of Messina had never seen anything like the ferocity of our men,” he recorded. “At first they put up a rigorous defense. But when they saw the fight was going against them, as though quailing before the ruthlessness of these foreign slayers, they turned their backs and fled the city, and the surrounding territory as well.”

Skylitzes makes no mention of battle, but an illustration in one of his original manuscripts shows what his text does not: imperial galleys on the beach and waves of attackers with kite shields and swords sweeping inland, rushing over dead defenders in keffiyehs toward the crenellated town. It is believed Messina did not become a walled city until around the year 1200, and with such overwhelming strength of numbers, the invaders could easily have poured in and laid it to waste. Though it was Muslim territory, however, much of Messina’s populace was Christian, even Greek. (The city had been founded as a Greek colony in the 8th century BC.) And it was to be the base of operations for the Byzantine commander – none other than George Maniakes.

The former *katepano* of Anatolia may have been denied the governorship of Antioch, but he had been titled *protospatharios* (military governor), *magistros* (minister), and *strategos autokrator* (supreme general) of Italy, with orders to make Sicily part of it again. And despite their past animosity – or perhaps because of it – Harald’s old superior had been instrumental in

getting him assigned to the operation.

According to the *Morkinskinna*, before heading off to his new command the *strategos* advised Emperor Michael, “Now we should have the Varangians prove themselves. Many people believe you are employing a man of royal blood, and you know it is not the custom here for royalty to enter paid service.”

The emperor’s susceptibility to outside influence is not hard to understand. His health, never great, was getting worse. His epileptic fits were becoming more frequent. He avoided Empress Zoe altogether, lest she witness him in a moment of weakness. When it came to dealing with the wayward Norwegian prince, Michael walked a careful path. The Varangians finally completed construction of their church, to be dedicated to Harald’s brother St. Olaf, but Michael declined to participate in its consecration. And when Harald invited him to the feast of celebration, he responded by bringing along the gift of a magnificent bell for the church, but without a clapper. The symbolism is clear: Michael valued the Varangians, but they should not make too much noise.

Lately, according to the *Morkinskinna*, his troubles had been compounded by bad dreams in which St. Olaf castigated him. He sank into a violent illness.

“The empress soon discovered this,” claims the saga, “and asked Nordbrikt to try to cure the emperor.” Harald advised Michael to supply the clapper for the church bell and to honor St. Olaf. When the emperor agreed, his sickness passed. The story can be taken with a grain of salt, without missing the point: that even Michael was finding Harald to be a man of consequence.

Now the emperor told Maniakes, “Your suspicions are unproven, but it is certain that this man rises above most others both in wit and ability. Men like him are best used in defending our land.”

After his duties in the Holy Land, Harald couldn’t be blamed for having aspirations to the imperial bodyguard, but somebody – no doubt the *Orphanotrophos* – apparently felt he should be assigned back in the field, and Maniakes agreed. “Now both Nordbrikt and Gyrgir set sail again,” records the *Morkinskinna*, “agreeing to pay the emperor a hundred marks per ship, but to keep anything more.”

In those days the mark was not a currency but an accounting term, equal to twelve ounces of silver or about one-and-a-half ounces of gold. A hundred

marks per ship was no small sum. It is unclear whether the passage means Maniakes and Harald were to pay the emperor a bounty for each ship they captured, or pay said amount to rent or buy vessels they would use. As events turned out, it made little difference, because the Sicilian campaign would be fought mostly on land. And either way, Harald had no intention of paying up.

Reduced to a toehold in Italy, the Byzantines had desired to retake Sicily's huge troves of grain, cotton and silk, sugar and fruit, ever since the last imperial outpost had fallen to the Muslims in 965. Emperor Basil II had been laying plans for an invasion when he died in 1025. Since then the internal struggles of the Fatimid Caliphate had made reconquest even more inviting. Though both still owed nominal fealty to Cairo, Sicily and Ifriqiya (modern coastal Algeria/Tunisia/Libya) were separate emirates, kingdoms within an empire. The emirs of the Arab Kalbid dynasty had ruled Sicily for ninety years; the Berber Zirids in Tunisia, for almost seventy. Ethnic differences, however, had driven them apart, and both had grown in power to the point they were practically independent of Cairo. Their mutual, disastrous defeat at sea in 1035 evidently strained their relationship to breaking point.

The emir of Sicily, Ahmad II al-Akhal, struck a treaty with an emissary of the Byzantines. His brother, Abd Allah Abu Hafs, led the Berber peasantry in revolt. Facing overthrow, al-Akhal invited Byzantine troops from Italy. Abu Hafs, in turn, brought in 3,000–6,000 Zirid soldiers from Africa. With their spat threatening to turn into a proxy war between the Byzantines and the Fatimids, the Muslim brothers reached an uneasy truce. Awarding al-Akhal the title of *magistros*, the Byzantines withdrew, at which point the rebels rose up again, cornered the emir in the citadel of the city of Bal'harm (Palermo), and sent his head to the Zirid emir in Tunisia.

From the Byzantine point of view, clearing the treacherous Berbers out of Sicily would practically be a favor to the Fatimids. Emperor Michael and his eunuch brother John appointed their brother-in-law Stephen as *archon*, supreme naval commander in charge of the Byzantine fleet. Apparently he needed the work. "He came from some quite obscure back country or hinterland," wrote the courtier Psellos, who knew Stephen before and after his promotion, "was no farmer, owned no land, didn't herd or even own cattle or sheep, and had no other means or job prospects." His sole naval experience

was as a *kalaphates*, one who caulked boat hulls to make them watertight.

Stephen had at least gotten the imperial army across the strait intact. Half of it consisted of Greeks and Turks from the themes of Asia Minor, led by the *protospatharios* of Armenia, Katakalon Kekaumenos, whose autobiography would be used extensively by Skylitzes in his history of the empire. The rest of the army were all mercenaries.

Besides Harald and his Varangians, the Italian nobleman Arduin commanded 2,000 Lombards (or Longobards, "Long Beards"). According to Malaterra, or the Normans he heard it from, "The Lombards are indeed an untrustworthy race, always doubting the honest man." As a people, they were originally from the plains of northern Germany, but had moved south during the age of barbarian migrations. A generation earlier they had staged a rebellion against their Byzantine overlords and fought the climactic battle at Cannae, the same field where Hannibal of Carthage had taken on the Romans 1,200 years earlier. Hannibal had won. The Lombards lost. Their surviving troops had entered into the pay of Prince Guaimar IV of Salerno, but when his wars were won and Constantinople requested assistance for the Sicilian expedition, wrote Malaterra, "The prince, seizing the chance to rid himself of them honorably, immediately agreed." The Lombards were not particularly happy to be fighting for, instead of against, the Byzantines.

There were also a few hundred knights of Normandy under the exiled mercenary Rainulf Drengot. Norman mercenaries had fought for the Lombards against the Greeks at Cannae and stayed on after the defeat. The abbot Desiderius of Montecassino, later Pope Victor III, whose father died in battle with the Normans and was likely biased, wrote that they were "avid for looting, always eager to seize other people's property." Those signed up for Sicily included the brothers William and Drogo de Hauteville, the eldest of twelve sons of the petty lord Tancred de Hautville, eight of whom had come south to seek their fortune. They would prove indefatigable in the attaining of it.

In the face of these overwhelming numbers, Messina not only surrendered to Maniakes, but up to 15,000 Christian Sicilians rallied to his banner. He marched them some seven miles over the Peloritan Mountains – not very high, but steep – to the cliff-top town of Rometta, modern Rametta. This had been the last Christian enclave to fall to the Saracens in 965 and had been subsequently fortified by them. (The town name derives from the Arabic

rameth, “fortified walls.”) They met the Byzantines with up to 50,000 troops, but were defeated. “Maniakes certainly put the Tunisians to flight,” recorded Skylitzes. “So many were killed that the nearby river overflowed with blood.”

The blood flowed from both sides, however, and rather than campaign further along the northern coast toward Palermo, Maniakes spent that winter and on into 1039 working his way southward through Sicily. “He went on to take thirteen Sicilian towns,” Skylitzes reported, “and then, piece by piece, to conquer the entire island.”

Skylitzes is as biased toward his people as the Scandinavian writers are toward theirs. As shall be seen, the Byzantines never came near to conquering Sicily, and can hardly be said to have conquered the Val Demone, its northeastern third. *King Harald’s Saga,* naturally, gives Harald much of the credit for accomplishing that much, and the *Morkinskinna* – notwithstanding Snorri’s use of it, a certainly biased source – makes much of the discord between him and his commander Maniakes. It portrays the *strategos* as a halfhearted, indecisive leader, ever willing to look for easier pickings when encountering any resistance. As a result, Harald, always bargaining for the prime share of booty, conquers the island virtually on his own, with some of his methods too clever by far and almost certainly apocryphal.

During one siege, it is claimed, Harald had his Varangians trap birds that nested in the town when they came out over the city walls to the nearby woods to feed. The men fixed wood shavings, sulphur and wax to the birds, lit it on fire and let them fly home to set the village’s thatched roofs alight. “In no time the whole town was aflame,” reported Snorri. “All the citizens fled from within, begging for mercy…. Harald spared the lives of anyone who pleaded for quarter, and took over the town.” That virtually the same fantastic tale had been told of Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and various other heroes before and after Harald did not keep it from meeting Snorri’s standards of veracity.

He tells another, more plausible story of the Varangians besieging a city on an arid plain – in hilly Sicily, most likely the Plain of Catania, south of Mount Etna on the way to Syracuse. The *Morkinskinna* goes into detail. Maniakes told Harald, “This town is impregnable and will not fall when attacked. We will have to withdraw, and I imagine we will do better out on

the coast, where the enemy has less manpower."

But Harald was not interested in fighting more often for smaller gains. "What will you award me if I take the town?"

The *strategos* agreed Harald could have his pick of loot. So Harald and his men, in order to hide their intentions, began digging into the side of a gully or ravine toward the town. Mining was hardly unknown to Byzantines, and it is inconceivable that it never occurred to Maniakes to tunnel beneath the city walls. It is entirely possible, however, that he bargained to put the brawny Varangians to such hard, menial labor, and the story is simply Harald putting the best face on things. At any rate, once the tunnel was long enough to reach under the town, the men dug upward until they hit flagstone tiles.

"This was the floor of a stone hall," declares *King Harald's Saga*. "They broke through the floor and swarmed up into it. Many of the townsmen, sitting there eating and drinking, were taken by complete surprise." Slaughtering everyone in reach, Harald and his men threw open the city gates and the rest of the army poured in. "In that way Harald captured the town, and with it a huge amount of plunder."

The sagas claim Maniakes then tried to renege on his deal with Harald over the spoils, but the mercenaries in the army supported the Norseman. As shall be seen, this is an entirely believable turn of events.

Snorri's recounting is then conflated with the *Morkinskinna*'s, so that Harald appears to employ two different ruses to gain entry to what was likely the same city, "the biggest and most well-defended of them all, not to mention the most affluent and densely populated. It was enclosed by wide moats, and Harald knew it could not be taken by the same strategies he had used on the previous towns."

Though unnamed in the sagas, this city can hardly be any place other than Siracusa, modern Syracuse, the ancient Greek city-state then already 1,700 years old, onetime capital of *Magna Graecia* (Grecian Italy), and of Roman Sicily, and even for a short time capital of the Byzantine Empire. The Saracens had moved their capital to Palermo, but by holding both Messina in the north and Syracuse in the south the Byzantines would control the island's entire eastern coast, the direct approaches from the rest of the empire. In the spring of 1040 they arrived outside the city walls.

"A duke was in command of the town," reports the *Morkinskinna*, "and the townspeople enjoyed high morale. They goaded the Byzantines to attack,

confident in their own large army."

"The town's fortifications were so strong that there was no way of storming it," wrote Snorri. "So the Byzantines laid siege to it, blockading it so that no supplies could get in."

According to the *Morkinskinna*, Maniakes was not eager for the undertaking. "I think it ill-advised," he told Harald, "to waste all we have gained by conquering this third town. There are no trees or forests here where you can catch birds, and there is no way of tunneling underneath it. On top of that, a great host has gathered within."

Harald was nothing if not game. "True, it is not without risk, but we should try together and see if we can succeed," he said. "But if you must rely on me again to devise a plan, I require the same reward as before."

To this Maniakes – in the sagas, ever tractable to Harald – agreed, and Harald laid his plan. (Or two plans, if all the versions of the story are considered.) According to *King Harald's Saga*, Harald ordered his men to show the enemy contempt by playing sports below the walls, just outside of weapons range. After a few days of this the defenders became lackadaisical, coming to their posts unarmed and even leaving the gate open. Seeing this, some of the Varangians, including Harald's lieutenants Ulf and Halldor, hid weapons under their tunics. When they were close enough, they rushed the open gate, fought their way inside, and took the town.

But Snorri also recounts the *Morkinskinna*'s version, in which Harald had his tent set up separate from the army's, though within sight of the city walls, and put out the story that he was deathly ill. (According to Snorri, he really *was* ill.) The townspeople, through spies and back-and-forth banter with the besiegers, learned of this. When, after a week, it was announced that Harald had died, the Varangians sent emissaries to ask permission to bring his body inside for a church funeral, with all the gifts of gold and precious offerings that entailed. Evidently there were still any number of Christian churches inside, and plenty of priests all vying for the opportunity to host such a nobleman's procession, none of whom remembered the story of the Trojan Horse. They agreed to let just twelve men bear the coffin within the walls.

"I will be in the coffin," Harald told his men. "You will put it down as you enter the gate. I will chance it to see how quickly I can get out of it."

As it happened, he decided it would be better to act as a pallbearer at his own funeral, along with Ulf and Halldor. The *Morkinskinna* tells us, "The

men bearing the body wore silk tunics and broad hats to signify mourning, but underneath they wore helmets and armor. When they arrived at the gate, the procession had some kind of trouble. They dropped the coffin across the entrance, and on that signal a trumpet blared. The army, fully armed, charged the town and crowded into the gateway."

By this time it is difficult to suss out which trick is which, but the stories both come together in the battle at the gate. "The Varangians had no shields," reports *King Harald's Saga*, "so they wrapped their cloaks around their left arms. Many were wounded, and a few killed, and very quickly they faced a hard fight." All twelve pallbearers, including Harald, Ulf and Halldor, were injured. Harald's standard-bearer was killed. (We have no idea if he was by this time using his personal raven banner, Land-Waster. The Varangians usually carried a Byzantine-style dragon standard, the *drakon*, a windsock with a bronze dragon-head mouth.)

Harald called on Halldor to take up the flag, but Halldor had his hands full. "Let the devil carry the standard for you, coward!"

("This was said more in the heat of the moment than from real feeling," interceded Snorri, "for Harald was the most courageous fighter.")

"You are talkative today, Halldor," answered Harald, no doubt busy himself, "but fearless all the same."

The sagas agree that right about the time of this exchange, Halldor took a savage wound: "He suffered a deep gash to the face, leaving an ugly scar for life."

Harald, as any good hero-myth would have it, faced the city commander himself. The *Morkinskinna* reports, "The duke of the city, a distinguished man, drew his sword, which was very valuable. Nordbrikt took hold of the sword and twisted it out of his grip, making the duke his prisoner."

This goes counter to the Norman, and perhaps more famous, version of events at Syracuse, recounted by Malaterra:

> Its citizens came out to battle Maniakes' men. Archadius [a title, not a name, related to the Arabic *al-qu'id*, leader, or *al-qaldi*, magistrate] who ruled over the city gave our warriors a good fight, killing many of them. William, Tancred's son, known as "Iron Arm", in a fury, charged forward and bravely rushed him, with a tremendous blow striking him dead. This victory was acclaimed and admired by Greeks and Sicilians alike.

Not so much, it seems, by the Scandinavians, who fail to make the slightest mention of it in their sagas. It was not an age for modesty. Each faction spun

legends to their own advantage.

With Syracuse conquered, in Palermo the Zirid emir Abdullah ibn-Muizz finally decided to take his island back. Skylitzes recorded, “the Tunisian recovered from his defeats, called up an even larger army, and came to Sicily intending to chase Maniakes off the island.”

“The Sicilians raised a force of perhaps 60,000 men,” declared Malaterra (though modern historians think he exaggerated by a factor of ten), “and sought battle with Maniakes and his army near Troina.”

Almost 4,000 feet up in the Nebrodi Mountains, Troina is one of the highest towns in Sicily, where the road from the north coast crosses over into the valley of the Simeto River, headed down onto the plain of Catania and Syracuse – a natural site for a battle.[1] “When Maniakes heard of this,” wrote Skylitzes, “he marched with the forces under his command and went out to meet ibn-Muizz, though not before he instructed the emperor’s brother-in-law Stephen, commanding the fleet, to lock down the coast, making sure that, once the battle was joined, the defeated Tunisian could not escape for home.”

The Muslims camped across a valley in Cerami, about eight miles away and 600 feet below Troina. At such an altitude, ibn-Muizz had no intention of making his troops perform a climb prior to a fight. “He camped on a sloped plain,” reported Skylitzes, “and waited for the battle to come to him.”

But the emir was not just waiting. As the 12th-century monk Neilos Doxapatres of Palermo heard it, “Since he wished to achieve a particularly decisive victory and make a show of his power over the Romans, he used all his guile and malicious trickery to deceive the people of God.”

Ibn-Muizz, wishing the Christians to come down to him, laid a trap for them. Specifically, he employed caltrops – each a set of four spikes, all forged together at one end in the center so that, scattered on the ground, it sits on three like a tripod, with the fourth sticking straight up to impale anyone stepping on it – a kind of primitive, non-explosive land mine. “He ordered a huge number of caltrops to be manufactured and scattered all around his camp as a kind of barrier,” reported Neilos, “or as he thought, an unbreakable defense, since in the melee the Byzantine cavalry, when their horses went down, would be caught by the caltrops and defeated with little effort.”

Byzantine scouts, however, spotted the obstacle field. Ibn-Muizz and his

Arabs were about to learn their northern enemies were not the ignorant, uncouth barbarians they believed.

Horseshoes, usually of bronze, were well known throughout Europe by AD 1000, but had only been nailed onto the rim of the hoof for about 500 years. Before that, the Romans in northwest Europe learned from the local Celts to protect their horses' feet with *soleae ferreae* – literally "horse shoes," but more accurately "hipposandals" – strap-on leather boots with iron soles. Predecessor to the modern hoof boot, they protected horses' feet against hard cobblestone pavements, and in trail riding against rocks and rough terrain. And terrain does not get much rougher than when strewn with caltrops. Neilos sneered, "This ignorant man [ibn-Muizz] was unaware the Byzantine mounts had their hooves completely protected by broad and sturdy plates."

Following good imperial military doctrine, Maniakes deployed his forces in three lines, with his Greek and Norman cavalry on the wings and his best infantry – Harald and the Varangians – in the center, as Emperor Leo VI had advised his generals in his manual, the *Taktika*: "the assault troops, men you know to be particularly bold and brave."

Normally medieval battles began with an exchange of arrows, bolts and javelins before the infantry engaged, and the cavalry only swept in to mop up survivors after the enemy formation became disordered. At Troina, however, a summer dust storm kicked up, blowing into the Arabs' faces so that they couldn't become ordered in the first place. Maniakes immediately sent in his heavy cavalry: the *kataphraktoi*, cataphracts, riders and horses alike draped to the knees, and their faces completely masked, in mail armor.

The medieval version of the modern battle tank, the cataphracts' specialty was smashing through enemy infantry. Though they carried both the *kontarion* (lance) and long swords, their preferred weapon was the *bardoukion* (sledgehammer), a long-hafted mace with a round or flanged head.[2] The sight of these cataphracts hurtling out of the dusty murk struck terror into the Saracens. "They are fearless in anticipation of victory but craven when it is denied," Leo VI had advised his generals of the Muslims. "They believe everything comes from God, even evil. If they suffer a defeat, they do not fight back since it is God's will. Once overwhelmed, they are completely beaten."

"Then that mighty warrior William son of Tancred," declared the typically

pro-Norman Malaterra, “proud of his fame in war, led the vanguard of the Greek army into battle and took on the enemy with his own knights before the Greeks had even arrived on the field. In his bravery he killed many, forced the rest to retreat and came out the victor.” The fact that only 300 Norman knights took the field at Troina means it is more likely they simply took part in the rout, riding down enemy soldiers as they ran. According to Skylitzes, some 5,000 Africans were killed.

It is said the Saracens, fleeing to the northeast of Cerami, were cut down in such numbers that the river there, tinged red with blood, was renamed the Saracena. “While our men chased after the enemy,” reported Malaterra, “the Greeks arrived on the battlefield and took the opportunity to plunder.” Of course, front and center in the Byzantine infantry were Harald and the Varangians. It fits very well with their *modus operandi* as mercenaries to grab the first chance to loot the dead and the Saracen baggage train while the cavalry were off chasing down fugitives. Malaterra lamented, “They divided it up between them, leaving nothing for our men, who were not there, being with the rest of the army.”

As far as the Varangians were concerned it was a case of first come, first served. If William Iron-Arm, his brother Drogo and their men wished to pursue glory rather than riches, that was their choice.

The emir ibn-Muizz had fled for the coast. The entire island lay open for the taking. The battle of Troina would indeed be a turning point in the subjugation of Sicily.

But not in the way the victors anticipated.

NOTES

1 It would become a battleground again in August 1943, between the Allies and the Axis in World War II.

2 Interestingly, although the Normans often get credit for bringing the couched lance – held under the armpit, using the momentum of the horse rather than just the strength of the arm in thrusting or throwing – to Europe, the Bayeux Tapestry depicts them at the Battle of Hastings in 1066 as holding their spears overhead for tossing. On the other hand, numerous illustrations in the Skylitzes manuscripts show Byzantine cavalry, including at Troina a generation before Hastings, couching the lance. Made possible by the adoption of the stirrup, the technique revolutionized mounted warfare but did not become widespread until a hundred years after Troina. The illustrators, working in the 12th century, may have adapted “modern” lance technique to the then-hundred-year-old stories. That, or the Normans got the idea from the Byzantines.

X

UPRISING

Often my lord rose early
To destroy the peace of the French.
It was not a swift ride for the vigorous king
To the lady's bower.

Illugi Bryndoelaskald

It had taken Maniakes about two years to drive the Saracen emirs from Sicily, and only a few months for all his work to come undone, and for Harald to find himself not only back on the Italian mainland, but preparing to fight his former allies. Near the Olivento River in Apulia, the boot-heel of Italy, he and his Varangians stood with several thousand Byzantine mercenaries, about to crush a thousand or so Lombard and Norman rebels, including the Hauteville brothers Drogo and William Iron-Arm. But the Byzantines would have to fight without Maniakes to lead them.

The imperious, avaricious *autokrator* had brought his downfall entirely upon himself. After the victory at Troina he had behaved with proper decorum, giving thanks to the Holy Mother by ordering the construction of a monastery near the battle site and donating an icon of St. Lucia, the patron saint of Syracuse, martyred for her faith after having her eyes put out. (The village that grew up around it – at first populated with a Byzantine garrison to guard the newly conquered territory and after the 1230s around a castle built by Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II – is still known as Maniace.)

But Maniakes' true colors eventually showed through. When the Normans

and Lombards objected to the Byzantines and Varangians claiming the greater share of battle loot at Troina, they sent Arduin the Lombard, one of the few mercenaries who spoke Greek, to the Byzantine commander with their demands. According to Malaterra, “He was to ask Maniakes to properly divide the booty, either immediately or after he had considered their efforts.”

Arduin himself had done all right in the looting, having captured a fine warhorse. According to the contemporary Benedictine monk and historian Amatus of Montecassino, writing about forty years later, “The commander [Maniakes] demanded the horse three times, but Arduin refused to hand it over, declaring that he had won it by his own prowess and with God’s will.”

Malaterra concurred: “The general, furious, took this as an insult to his leadership, considering it his right to take first pick of the booty. He ordered Arduin to be beaten with staves through the camp, in order to shame our men.”

“Subject to the evil ways of the Greeks,” continued Amatus, “Arduin was stripped, beaten, and had his horse taken from him.”

This punishment seems rather overwrought, and it should be remembered that both Malaterra and Amatus were pro-Norman in their writings, but the final effect was true enough. Not only were the Normans cheated of their share of the loot, but now the Lombards were insulted as well. “When Arduin told them what had happened,” recorded Malaterra, “our men did not take it well, and wanted to attack the Greeks. Arduin could only hold them back by coming up with a better plan – namely, that he would hide his anger and strike back at Maniakes when he least expected it.”

The Byzantine general failed to take the advice of Leo the Wise. “Often enough, successful people neglect their own protection,” the emperor had written in the *Taktika*. “They look down on their underlings, and forget their own vulnerability. So success often harms the successful more than the unsuccessful.”

And now Maniakes compounded his error. He had expected to capture ibn-Muizz, whom he would then take back to Constantinople and display in a victory parade worthy of old-time Roman conquerors, before seeing him put to death in whatever fashion the emperor fancied. But now he learned that not only had the emir escaped the battle; he had escaped Sicily altogether, outwitting the *archon* Stephen. Skylitzes recorded of the Saracens at Troina, “their leader fled in defeat, down to the shore, boarded a fast ship and

escaped homeward. When he learned of this, Maniakes was furious."

The *autokrator* summoned the worthless admiral to his camp for an upbraiding, but again forgot Leo's warning: "As one of the ancients said, an appropriate fear treated carefully increases safety, but an uncontrolled contempt, leaving one open to retribution, is dangerous."

"When Stephen arrived to meet him, Maniakes berated him angrily and, raising his whip, thrashed him several times about the head. He called him a shiftless coward who had betrayed the emperor," recorded Skylitzes. "Stephen did not take lightly to such ill treatment and insults, and immediately sent a letter to the *Orphanotrophos* claiming that Maniakes was plotting a revolt against the empire."

Indeed, it may have appeared so. In Italy the Lombards were already up in arms over the taxes and manpower being exacted to support the Sicilian expedition. Arduin's troops, and their Norman allies under Rainulf Drengot and William Iron-Arm, felt they had more to gain fighting against the Byzantines than with them, but for the time being Arduin kept his own counsel. "Maniakes, not knowing what they had in mind, commended the knight's [Arduin's] forbearance and promised him rewards," reported Malaterra, "although behind his back he laughed and scorned him."

"Arduin took this in stride," recorded Amatus, "but in his heart he continually laid plans."

The Normans and Lombards would have been smart to get Harald and the Varangians on their side. Harald, however, had established an entirely different relationship with Maniakes. At Syracuse, according to the *Morkinskinna*, he had made clear to Gyrgir his thoughts regarding the plunder:

> [Nordbrikt] desired the most valuable items from the plunder, but Gyrgir said that he was keeping them for the emperor. Nordbrikt said that according to their pact he was entitled to them and that he was not likely to let them go without a fight. He reminded Gyrgir that it was due to the Varangians that they had taken such riches and achieved so many great accomplishments.

Maniakes apparently valued Harald more than Arduin and the Normans, and as usual – at least, according to the sagas – backed down. Harald, as a mercenary, had no reason to side with the Normans against the *strategos*, for he had profited greatly in Maniakes' service. "All the money that he did not spend on his military ventures," confides the *Morkinskinna*, "he sent north by secret couriers into King Yaroslav's safekeeping. Such riches were amassed

that no one knew its weight. This was not unexpected, since he was raiding the richest lands in the world, with the most gold and treasures. It was not as if he was battling cowherds."

That said, Harald's name does not come up in ensuing events, which indicates he was smart enough to avoid getting between Maniakes and the discontented mercenaries.

Finally Arduin felt the time had come to make his move. Packing up in secret, the Lombards and the Normans abandoned their camp by night, made for Messina and transited the strait unopposed. Crossing Calabria, the toe of Italy, they marched on Apulia, the heel of Italy, to set up a new kingdom of their own.

In Constantinople it certainly could have appeared to Emperor Michael and John the *Orphanotrophos* that, as their brother-in-law claimed, this mutiny was entirely their general's doing. They ordered the immediate arrest of Maniakes, his return to the capital, and command of the army handed to Stephen.

Harald would certainly have been there to see Maniakes put in chains, and as the Varangian commander and instrument of imperial will, very may well have locked the manacles himself. It must have been with mixed feelings, however, as he saw Byzantium's best general put on a boat for Constantinople and Stephen take the reins. Skylitzes declared the imperial brother-in-law promptly "ruined the whole state of affairs and lost Sicily through avarice, cowardice and negligence."

"Resentful envy was the downfall of Maniakes, his achievements, and that great campaign [the conquest of Sicily]," agreed the contemporary historian Michael Attaleiates. "For those next in line to command made stupid and wrongful decisions, causing the Romans to lose the entire island and most of their army too."

Stephen, the would-be admiral at sea, was even more out of his element as a general on land. The defeat of their emirs had not overly discouraged the Sicilian Saracens. Without Maniakes' strong leadership, the garrisons he had stationed in the various conquered cities and towns soon had uprisings on their hands. In short order the Muslims reclaimed the land taken by the Byzantines until all that remained of the invaders were holed up in Messina. That their last stand was led not by Stephen, but by the general Katakalon Kekaumenos – who saved the city, after four days of siege, by riding out at

the head of his army to attack the Saracens and personally kill their leader – indicates that Stephen had already boarded a ship and escaped.

Emperor Michael and John the *Orphanotrophos* could not ignore such a military catastrophe, even by their own sister's husband. Like Maniakes, Stephen was recalled to Constantinople in disgrace. In designating his replacement, though, the imperial brothers again failed to choose wisely. As new commander in Italy they appointed one Michael Dokeianos, a wealthy neighbor of theirs from Dokeia (modern Tokat) in Paphlagonia. It is thought Dokeianos served under Maniakes in Sicily, and may have been the very man who flogged Arduin through the Byzantine camp, provoking the mutiny of the Lombards and Normans. In that case he had good reason, as he was likely a relative of the previous *katepano* of Italy, Nikephoros Dokeianos, whom the Lombards had killed in their initial uprising in January 1040. Michael would not do much to redeem the family name. Skylitzes called him "an inept man, not at all suited to public affairs. He wasted no time in turning everything to confusion and disaster."

By this time Harald, as would any halfway competent commander, must certainly have been questioning the wisdom of his Byzantine overlords. Yet he had signed on to fight for them and, unlike the Normans and Lombards, kept his word.

Employing a time-honored Byzantine diplomatic technique, Dokeianos attempted to buy off Arduin with the military command of the village of Melfi in the foothills of Mount Vulture, an extinct volcano on the Apulian frontier. His intent, apparently, was to make the Lombards a kind of buffer between the untamed hill country inland and the lush farms and fishing towns toward the coast. What he actually did was give Arduin a fortified base controlling a strategic mountain pass between the two zones. The Lombard promptly stirred up the locals and called on the Normans to join him: "I will lead you against weak-willed, womanish men who live in wealthy and productive lands."

Together they quickly captured the nearby towns around the base of the volcano – Venosa, Lavella, Ascoli. According to Skylitzes, "Michael was hesitant to muster the entire Roman army to fight the Normans," but the fact is that much of the imperial forces, or what was left of them, were still in Sicily. Not until March 1041 did the Byzantines seek a confrontation in Italy, setting out from Bari on the Adriatic coast. Malaterra again exaggerated their

numbers by a factor of ten or more, the more glory to his Norman patrons: “The Greeks ruling over those lands raised a huge army from Calabria and Apulia, numbering some 60,000 troops, and set out with the goal of driving the Normans back where they came from.”

The Byzantines managed to push the rebels out of Ascoli and across the Olivento River, which winds down off Mount Vulture. According to Malaterra, they sent a messenger to advise the rebels to back off or face battle. Noticing the courier’s fine horse, the Norman knight Hugh Tudebuis went up and punched it in the head with his bare fist, so hard that it went down. The Normans hauled the terrified envoy to his feet so he could watch as they dragged his horse to a nearby cliff and threw it off the edge. Then they put him on another mount and sent him back to give the imperials their definitive “no.”

Today the Olivento River has been completely tamed, even paved along much of its length. A thousand years ago, though, it was tempestuous, with a propensity to flood in the rainy season, yet dry-bedded in summer. On the morning of March 17, when the Byzantines crossed, the water came up to their horses’ bellies. On the far bank Dokeianos arranged the army as had Maniakes at Troina, according to Emperor Leo’s design: in three ranks, with a reserve in the rear, a support in the middle, and the hardcore troops, which again would have included the Varangians, across the front.

Beyond the usual concern that one was about to gamble one’s life in battle, at Olivento the imperial troops must have had a bad feeling that the odds were not as good as usual. A veteran of Byzantine service like Harald (who was still only about twenty-five or -six) knew this was not going to be like fighting screaming Arab tribesmen. The Lombards and Normans, under William Iron-Arm and Count Drogo, were quite familiar with Byzantine tactics. From his position in the vanguard, Harald, as he cinched up his lamellar cuirass of metal scales over leather – the Greeks called them *klibania*, ovens, because they were so hot – and pressed his conical helmet down tight, could see the rebels across the field forming one thin line.

William of Apulia, writing about a half-century later, numbered the rebels at a mere 500 foot and 700 horse, with only a few wearing mail and carrying shields. Infantry, bolstered by a small number of horsemen, took position on the flanks with orders not to flee the field. In the center, the main body of cavalry sent out a column to test the Byzantines’ resolve.

Neither did Dokeianos commit his entire force, instead sending out a contingent, probably including the Varangians, to block the Norman knights and drive them back. Both sides were following imperial doctrine, holding their main forces in reserve to strike at the most opportune moment.

Some of the Normans in this battle might have been present at their defeat in 1018, on this very same plain of Apulia, by the Byzantines at Cannae. Any student of warfare, however, would be thinking of that first battle of Cannae, in which Hannibal of Carthage feigned a retreat with his center to lure the Romans forward until his flanks could surround them on both sides. Seeing rebel infantry on each flank and wary of falling into a double envelopment, the Byzantine vanguard – the Varangians – did not pursue the Norman knights far. The result was that the rebels charged again, and withdrew again, and all day the Battle of Olivento seesawed back and forth along the riverbank.

The deciding factor at Olivento was not numbers, or position, or tactics. It simply boiled down to determination. The rebels were mercenaries no more. They were fighting for a home. The Normans in particular had seen the richness of southern Italy and Sicily as theirs for the taking, not to mention the fecklessness of the Byzantine leaders and their foreign soldiers, who got paid win or lose. At some point late in the day, the imperial mercenaries called it quits. If the rebels wanted this land so badly, they could have it.

“When Dokeianos, commander of the imperial army, saw this,” recounted Amatus, “he immediately fled for his life.”

Harald, himself a mercenary, would have been quite content to cede the field, collect his pay, and live to fight another day. Without leadership, however, armies do not withdraw in good order, maintaining a defense. Upon Dokeianos’ flight, retreat became a rout. There was nothing Harald and the Varangians could do but run with them. Worse, the Byzantine army had its back to the river, and the Olivento had taken the rebels’ side.

“Now was there such a great miracle and sign of God’s power that it is difficult to believe,” documented Amatus, “after the Greeks broke and were fleeing across the river, the water rose so high that it overflowed its banks, though the weather was clear and calm with no rain.”

Rain must have fallen somewhere upstream, though, because the rivulet the mercenaries had waded through that morning had become a deluge. A knee-length hauberk of lamellar armor could weigh thirty-five pounds or more, and

was not easily donned or doffed without help. The fleeing mercenaries had a choice of wading into the current wearing their armor, or pausing to pull it off, leaving them helpless before the oncoming rebels. The Norman knights gave them little time to decide, killing many on the riverbank and chasing the rest into the rushing torrent. “As a result,” recounted Amatus, “more perished by drowning than in combat.”

Somehow Harald, Ulf and Halldor – perhaps simply by virtue of being tall Scandinavians, able to keep their heads above water – dragged themselves up on the far bank while many of the shorter Greeks vanished in the torrent. If William Iron-Arm, Drogo and their knights saw the survivors clamber from the water, they did not bother to pursue, perhaps out of respect for former allies, but more likely because there was no need. The rebels’ side of the Olivento was no longer Byzantine territory.

To his credit, Dokeianos recovered quickly from the defeat, retreating to Bari and calling for fresh troops. With reinforcements from Anatolia and local Italians pressed into service, in six weeks he raised a new army and was ready to seek battle again.

By this time the rebels had moved closer to the coast. They occupied the high ground at Mount Maggiore, less a mountain than a tall hill aside the Ofanto River, of which the Olivento is a tributary. (Amatus, for one, confused the rivers and battles. Malaterra, on the other hand, got his mountains mixed up, conflating the battle of Montemaggiore of May 4 with the battle of Montepeloso, four months later.) William of Apulia, having accounted for the battle of the Olivento, chronicled the battle on the Ofanto, at which perhaps 2,000 Normans and Lombards on the hilltop held off (he claimed) nine times their number of Byzantine mercenaries: “They defeated Michael just as before. The Greeks were beaten and many were killed. In his panic Dokeianos was thrown from his horse and his life was only saved by his groom’s quick thinking. His horse bolted madly into the torrent and Michael would have been captured if his servant hadn’t given him his own horse.”

That was the only stroke of luck Dokeianos enjoyed in all that summer of 1041. His idea of strategy was simply to keep throwing troops at the rebels. According to William, “Michael withdrew to the heights of Montepeloso

[modern Irsina, on the Bradano River, which flows into the Gulf of Taranto], and from there sent a message to the Greek army in Sicily, summoning them to come and replace the troops which he had lost in his defeat."

By this time, however, Emperor Michael and John the *Orphanotrophos* had had enough of Dokeianos. Like Maniakes and Stephen before him, he was recalled and replaced by a new *doux* of Italy, Exaugusto Boioannos, whose father Basil had defeated the Normans at the 1018 battle of Cannae. He brought with him a fresh contingent of Varangians, but proved even more incompetent than his predecessors. His bold strategy of attempting to besiege the Normans in their own city of Melfi was mooted on September 3 when the Normans intercepted him. Allowing the main part of the Byzantine army to pass them on the march, they captured the supply train in its rear, forcing the Greeks to counterattack.

The battle went back and forth all day. Despite being ill with malaria in his tent, William Iron-Arm came out to lead the Normans to victory. According to Amatus, "They slaughtered the Varangians, the Apulians, the Calabrians, and all those who had come to fight for gold or silver now lay dead upon the battlefield with neither weapons nor graves."

Boioannos was captured, paraded in chains back to the rebel capital, and held for ransom. "This was the third victory in a year secured by the French," wrote William, meaning the Normans. "The Greeks, routed, lost all hope of victory. All the fortified towns of Apulia, Bari, Monopoli, Giovenazzo and several other cities broke their treaties with the Greeks and went over to the French." Though William died not long afterward and would not live to see it, the Normans would soon shoulder aside their Lombard allies and found their own kingdom in Sicily, one that would endure for over 700 years.

Nor did Harald witness the final rebel triumph. He and Ulf and Halldor were not among the Varangians lost at Montepeloso, who had come as their replacements. Nor did they leave Italy in disgrace, for the defeats had not been theirs to own. Harald and his men had already been recalled and departed for Constantinople, where there was apparently an even more pressing need of them. Though he was Harald's best biographer, Snorri wrote almost nothing about his exploits in Italy. It is possible Harald, and Ulf and Halldor too, knowing there was not much to brag about in those days, never had much to say about them. The skald Illugi, of whom little is known except that he was from Brynjudalur in southern Iceland, left us only four stanzas

about Harald, but wrote them for him personally and touched on his time in Italy. His verse is unfortunately so full of obscure skaldic metaphors that it is not easy for modern readers to follow. His line about Harald's slow journey to the residence or bower of "the lady" leaves us to guess at her identity.

It is not difficult, though, to make that guess. Badly as the war had gone in Sicily and Italy, it was a mere scrap on the frontier of the empire, far from the capital. There, in Harald's absence, matters were going rapidly from bad to worse. It was no less than the empress of Byzantium who needed her favorite Varangian back at her side.

XI

The Burner of Bulgars

Harald, you subjugated the southern lands
With the shield for most esteemed Michael.

Illugi Bryndoelaskald

Those last months of 1041 were dark hours for the Byzantine Empire. Not only had it lost most of its gains in Sicily and Italy, but it faced other enemies nearer to the capital. The Serbs were expanding their territory and openly plundering imperial ships on the Adriatic. In the spring of 1040 they had trapped and destroyed an imperial army sent to bring them to heel. Even closer to home, the Bulgars and Slavs had likewise risen up against the *Orphanotrophos*' exorbitant taxation, pressing into Thrace and Macedonia toward Constantinople itself. When Harald and Ulf and Halldor stepped off their boat in the capital they found the city on edge, with foreign adversaries on the doorstep and the empire weakening by the day.

The foreboding emanated from the royal palace itself, where the Varangians reported for duty to a new *Akolouthos*, a new commander of the Guard: no less than the emperor's nephew, also named Michael, son of the disgraced former admiral Stephen, who had recently died. If Harald expected this generation of ship-caulkers to be as incompetent as his father, he was mistaken. Whatever else he was, this Michael was not stupid. He had all the Paphlagonian will to power, coupled with what a modern analysis might diagnose as a psychopathic personality. With hindsight, Psellos recalled of him:

In everything pertaining to his self-esteem – superior status and rank in the hierarchy, or at least the appearance of it – he did not much resemble his parents. He had an unusual talent for covering up "the fire beneath the ashes." In other words, he concealed a wicked nature under a benign front. He was adept at scheming and plotting. He thought little of his patrons and gave no thanks to anyone for amity or interest or support for him. Yet he had such powers of deception that he kept all that hidden.

Much had changed in the capital while Harald and his Varangians were off battling foreign enemies. They owed this Michael not just the respect due him as their paymaster, as commander of the Guard, but as the probable successor to his uncle the emperor, and furthermore likely to assume that throne in the very near future.

For Michael IV was dying. Even as the Bulgar uprising threatened the heart of the empire, his health had gone into a precipitous decline. "It was now plain to see that the emperor's whole body was swollen," reported Psellos, "and impossible not to notice the hydropsy from which he was suffering."

Hydropsy, more commonly then called dropsy, and in modern terms edema, is an accumulation of fluid in body cavities and especially under the skin. The resultant acute swelling is not only agonizing but disfiguring. Harald must have been shocked, upon entering the imperial throne room, to see – still enclosed in the protective, slow-motion cocoon of senators, generals and aristocrats, priests and officials and court favorites, serenaded by a choir and protected by Varangians – the handsome Adonis of six years earlier turning into a bloated, pain-wracked monstrosity.

Michael had deputed the running of the state to his brother John. And John urged the emperor to name a successor, before the people chose one for him. But who could be trusted to carry on the family name, to be in effect all but co-emperor? After all, many of the Paphlagonian males, including John, had been violently taken out of contention. But it was the *Orphanotrophos* who suggested, "There is our sister's son, Michael, who has been put in command of your bodyguard. Why not make him Caesar?"

In Byzantine times *Kaisar* was a rank second only to emperor. Nominally their superior, the younger Michael was still to be subservient to his elder uncles, but the Paphlagonian family fortune, and future, would be preserved. The trick had been ensuring that the other family concerned – the dynasty of the Macedonian emperors, dating back the better part of two centuries and culminating in Empress Zoe – was not threatened by his elevation. Luckily John had a solution for that, too. "I suggest," he told the emperor, "that we

should make her our nephew's mother. If she adopts him it will appear more proper, and at the same time we can persuade her to raise him to the stature and title of Caesar. She won't refuse. Zoe is compliant enough, and in any case, she can do nothing to oppose us."

If Harald had been asked, how might he have advised the emperor and the empress concerning these developments? As a military commander, his opinion was worth little in matters of imperial succession, but as a foreign prince raised to rule – and so far denied a throne of his own – his advice carried much more weight. In retrospect, that may be the very reason he was effectively exiled for years on the frontier and had no say in matters now. The empress was by this time in her early sixties. She had always desired children, and despite her distrust of the *Orphanotrophos* had agreed to adopt the younger Michael as her own son, thereby making the Paphlagonian a Macedonian… or changing the Macedonian dynasty into the Paphlagonian.

The ceremony had taken place in the Church of St. Mary of Blachernae, nearly six centuries old, situated in the northwest corner of the city. Zoe and her new son were conducted into the presence of the emperor, who congratulated him on his adoption and formally named him Caesar. With all due rites and ceremonies, this was confirmed by the court, and the congregation was dismissed. John believed that all his worries were over and that he had secured the family fortunes. He forgot, though, that he had to keep control of his prospective ruler.

The entire Paphlagonian family took pains to ingratiate themselves with the new Caesar, with the exception of the emperor and the *Orphanotrophos*. He was given a residence, not in Constantinople but out in the suburbs. This they declared to be some kind of honor, but it was really to hold him at arm's length. The younger Michael came and went not of his own will, but at the older Michael's beck and call, prevented from meddling in imperial affairs. He was Caesar in name only, and would not soon forget it.

"What had happened," wrote Psellos, "was actually the cause of future catastrophes, and what appeared to be the founding of a new imperial dynasty proved really to be its utter destruction."

In light of all this, it is no surprise that a proven leader among the Varangian Guard (who, it must be remembered, had just lost a large fraction of their total manpower in Italy) had been ordered back to the capital, along with his men, in anticipation of a transfer of power. And just to make it

official, Harald Sigurdsson – Nordbrikt, Araltes, still only twenty-six years old, the same age as the Caesar – was finally awarded his well-earned promotion to *manglabites*, one of the emperor's closest bodyguards.

In accordance with *De Ceremoniis*, the *Book of Ceremonies* of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, set down almost a hundred years earlier, the promotion was celebrated in the *Chrysotriklinos*, the golden reception hall of the Great Palace. With the whole company of the imperial court in attendance, Harald was draped in a garnet cloak and positioned behind a curtain. At the appointed time, he was ushered into the presence of Michael IV, before whom he prostrated himself and who personally presented him with the *manglabion*, the golden whip or club, to be used in clearing a path for the emperor through crowds of well-wishers – or a mob, as the occasion demanded – and the right to wear a gold-hilted sword. Embracing the emperor's feet in thanks (and no doubt granted a proud smile from the Porphyrogenita seated at his side), Harald retreated down the steps to be welcomed by the existing *manglabitai* as one among their ranks, upon which they all prostrated themselves again and, with a shout of thanks to the emperor, escorted the new officer out to begin his duties. After, of course, a suitable celebration.

It was now Harald's task to be one of the Varangians who opened the palace gates each morning, and also to attend the emperor at all times as part of his personal retinue. In this way he personally observed the transformation of Michael IV. If the emperor was no longer a beautiful youth, neither was he the murderous regicide of former days. As it does with many, imminent death brought out his spiritual side. "When it came to the building of sacred churches, Michael outdid all previous emperors, both in artistry and in grandeur," attested Psellos. "He concerned himself primarily with the judgment to come – to free himself at last from the sins clouding his soul."

He was also determined, however, to leave a lasting mark on the battlefield.

A confrontation with the Bulgars had been brewing for decades. At the turn of the millennium Zoe's uncle, the emperor Basil II, who had been disastrously defeated and nearly captured by the Bulgars in 986, had undertaken the methodical reconquest of their lands, achieving a decisive victory in July 1014. Capturing 14,000 prisoners, Basil had ninety-nine out of every hundred blinded, and the remainder blinded in one eye so they could lead the rest home. The mere sight of them had given Bulgarian emperor

Samuel a fatal heart attack. Afterward Basil was known as *Boulgaroktonos*, the Bulgar Slayer.

After a generation of uneasy peace (most likely, to rebuild their manpower), in 1040 the Bulgarians proclaimed an emperor of their own. Peter II Delyan (Peter Delianos) was, depending on who told the story, either the grandson of Samuel or a former Byzantine slave. In his rise to power he had killed off several other claimants to the throne, and in the ensuing rebellion his army forced Michael IV to flee from Thessaloniki, the second-largest city in the empire, where he was visiting the shrine of St. Demetrius to seek relief from his illness. One of the imperial attendants, a Bulgarian named Manuel Ibatzes, was left in charge of the imperial treasure at Thessaloniki, but got his name in the history books by instead absconding with it to the rebels. Michael, running low on capable commanders, took it all as an affront to his legacy, and over the objections of his family and court, resolved to take the field personally against the Bulgars. For this, as Psellos put it, “The best soldiers were chosen, and generals with the most field experience.”

Naturally that included Varangians, particularly their young prince. As recorded by Kekaumenos, the savior of Messina, “Harald also campaigned with the emperor, with his own troops, and accomplished feats against the enemy worthy of his title and bravery.”

It appears the younger Michael also joined the army, but to little purpose. The emperor, perhaps already regretting the promotion, ordered his nephew’s humble tent to be pitched on the outskirts of camp.

For his part, the *Orphanotrophos* wove fresh schemes to deal with the Bulgarians. After his conquest, Basil had relocated their aristocracy to Armenia, where one of them, Alusian, had risen to become *strategos* of the Theme of Theodosiopolis. But he had differences with John, and on hearing of the uprising in Bulgaria, made his way there to lay his own claim to the throne. Given 40,000 troops by Peter, he spent 15,000 in a failed attempt to take Thessaloniki from Emperor Michael’s nephew Constantine. (This Constantine is not to be confused with Emperor Michael’s envious brother Constantine Katallakos, the former *doux* of Antioch. He had since then fallen into disfavor and been banished to his estate in Opsikion, in northwest Asia Minor, where he nursed his grudge against the *Orphanotrophos* and the rest of the imperial family.) Soon suspected of being a Byzantine plant, to head off his own execution Alusian invited Peter to a banquet, got him drunk,

gouged out his eyes with a kitchen knife and, for good measure, cut off his nose, but left him alive. This done, he escaped to Mosynopolis, a city in Thrace, since abandoned, where the emperor and the *Orphanotrophos* awarded him the rank of *magistros*, commander, for his treachery.

With Alusian's dirty work done – his descendants would go on to become Byzantine aristocrats well into the 14th century – Michael pressed into Bulgaria, meeting the rebels at Ostrovo, in western Macedonia, northern Greece. Peter, even though blind, led his army out against them. The Bulgarians were equipped with chariots, outmoded in warfare for at least a thousand years, especially in rocky, mountainous Greece. According to the *Morkinskinna*, Harald and his men soon learned why: "When the Bulgarians charged the Varangians, they tangled their wheels. Meanwhile the blind king [Emperor Peter] miraculously divined a man on a white horse leading the Varangian army, and the barbarians were so terrified by this vision that many of the kings [chieftains] fled, with only six remaining. In the end the Varangians took the victory."

The Varangians attributed this vision, and victory, to St. Olaf. Peter was taken alive and sent in chains to Thessaloniki, while Michael and Harald pressed on toward the Bulgarian capital at Prilep. It was protected by a Kievan-style wooden rampart. "But as soon as the emperor arrived," reported Skylitzes, "he destroyed the barricade in no time, scattered the Bulgar host and took Ibatzes prisoner."

How this was accomplished he leaves unsaid – the entire campaign was so brief that in the great scheme of empire it barely rated mention at all – but the answer might be found in Thjodolf Arnorsson's nickname for Harald in later years: the Burner of Bulgars. Wooden fortifications stood no chance against Greek fire. In a siege, imperial soldiers used *cheirosiphones*, man-sized portable projectors – flamethrowers – against walls and defenders alike. They would have turned any wooden ramparts, houses or cities into veritable fire traps, and the people inside into human torches.

"Michael made the rebels subjects of the Empire," summed up Psellos. "He returned to his palace in glory, with a vast number of captives, including the leaders of the Bulgars and the would-be emperor himself, their king, minus his nose and eyes."

On the way back to the capital the army paused at Mosynopolis. Here Michael awarded Harald with another promotion, this time to

spatharokandidatos. (The *kandidatoi*, named for their distinctive white tunics, had served as the palace guard in the bygone days of the empire; a *spatharios* or spatha-bearer wielded the *spatha* or *spatharion*, the late-Roman broadsword on which the design of later European broadswords was based.) *Spatharokandidatos* was still but a mid-level rank at court, but a high honor for a bodyguard, entitling Harald to wear, besides a *spatha* – presumably an even more richly decorated blade than the gold-hilted one carried by a lowly *manglabites* – a distinctive golden chain, the *maniakion*, on his chest. By every account he accepted the honors with due gratitude. After all, if and when he eventually returned home he could always say he had gone further in imperial service than Bolli Bollason.

So it was that Harald and his Varangians marched with Michael in his triumphant return to Constantinople. The victory parade was a tradition dating back to the old Roman days, not to be missed by either spectators or participants, but Michael was barely up to his hour of glory. Psellos recalled him, swaying on his horse, swollen fingers barely able to hold the reins and his face distended by the dropsy, leading the procession as if on the way to his own funeral.

Harald and his men, as was their duty, marched with the emperor, the *manglabitai* going ahead and using their whips and clubs on any citizens who impeded the progression along the *Mese* and through the various forums toward the Hippodrome, where the prisoners were put on display for the amusement of the crowd. As Michael, Zoe and John, with Harald accompanying them, emerged from the palace passageway into the *Kathisma*, the imperial box in the arena, as many as a hundred thousand voices roared their approval. The crowd was roughly divided into *demoi*, fans of the two longest-running chariot racing teams, the Blues and Greens. The *demoi*, however, were for all practical purposes political parties as well, the Blues favored by the upper class and the Greens champions of the working class. All were united, though, in their adulation of Michael, who soaked up their love like a fresh transfusion of strength.

Harald, in his white tunic, with his new *spatha* and gold medallion of rank, could bask in the reflection of imperial glory. Not so, however, the young Caesar. Psellos fretted at having seen the younger Michael standing off to the side while jokes were made to the elder Michael at his expense. While the prospective ruler bided his time, the outlander Harald occupied pride of

place.

It was not a situation that could last, for the emperor could no longer hold off the inevitable. His brothers hid him as best they could from public view to avoid any appearance of weakness. Their primary concern was no longer keeping him alive – obvious to all as a lost cause – but keeping power within the family.

On December 10, 1041, Michael was borne to the monastery he had built in honor of Saints Cosmas and Damian, Syrian physicians martyred for their Christian faith. Powerless though they were to save their emperor's life this time, Varangian guardsmen went wherever the emperor went, and as *spatharokandidatos*, Harald attended his master as he gave himself into the care of the priests. They removed Michael's imperial robes, clothed him in a simple monk's habit, and tonsured him – shaved the top of his head, leaving a crown of hair – and as Psellos put it, "bravely girding him against the onset of evil, let him go."

Word of the emperor's impending death quickly spread through the city to the palace, where the *Orphanotrophos* was ready to change one ruler for another. He summoned his brothers Constantine Katallakos – the former *doux* of Antioch, whom he now elevated to the rank of *mega domestikos*, army commander in chief – and George, already *protobestiarios* in charge of the emperor's personal household, to the palace, where they installed the young Caesar in place, ready to trade one Emperor Michael for another.

As Michael IV prepared to meet his maker, not as the emperor of all Christendom but in the guise of a humble monk, his peace was interrupted by a frantic hammering at the door of the church. It was, incredibly, the empress of all Christendom, Zoe, begging to see one last time the man she had loved and lost. "When she received word of his tonsure," recorded Psellos, "she dared to leave the women's quarters and, disdaining her own safety, went afoot to find him."

It was a huge risk, and an inordinate display of devotion, from a woman many might have accused of poisoning her husband – as many had accused her of poisoning her first husband – and further recalled her cynical visit to Romanos' chamber to verify his demise. "But Michael, whether ashamed of the evil to which she had incited him, or because he put her out of his mind in his preparations to meet God, refused to see her."

It is unrecorded who turned Zoe away from the chapel door, but odds are

very good – since the *Akolouthos* and Caesar, Michael, was away from his post, trying out the imperial throne for size – that it was Harald himself. Given his relationship with Zoe, he might have been the only man who could render her solace in the hour of her grief. But it was his duty to send her away, and according to Psellos she duly returned to the palace. If Harald failed to heed her pleas, she would not have forgotten the transgression.

Meanwhile, the emperor neared his end. As Psellos described it, "As his strength failed he returned to his couch and lay down. He was silent, for he had lost the ability to speak and breath came only with difficulty. Finally he gave up his soul to God."

"He had ruled seven years and eight months," recorded Skylitzes, "an upright, honorable man who lived a gentle and pious life except for his offense against the emperor Romanos, and many blamed that on the *Orphanotrophos*."

"In the years of his reign, Michael had accomplished and planned for much, and most often achieved it," agreed Psellos. "As for me, when I tally his successes against failures, I find the successes outweighed all else, and I do not doubt for a minute that he went on to a better world."

Harald had not known Michael well, nor for very long, but he had known him on the battlefield, which is a level of camaraderie unknown to courtiers and scribes. Whatever Harald was in Byzantine service, he owed directly or indirectly to Emperor Michael IV.

Now he would owe it to a very different emperor, Michael V… but also not for long.

XII

Reign of Terror

In the service of the emperor, be alert to slander against you, and never forget you can fall at any time. You never know what plots are being laid behind your back. And if you become the emperor's right-hand man, be modest about it and mind your tongue, for overweening honor and loose talk invite trouble.... Men strive to reach such high status but some, when they have earned it either by hard work or devotion or by God's will, in the end grow careless, think too much of themselves, and are struck down.

Kekaumenos

For three days the fate of all the Byzantine Empire hung in the balance. With no emperor on the throne, Constantinople was in limbo. John the *Orphanotrophos* lingered by the body of his dead brother, seeing to its resting place in the monastery where Michael had died. His surviving brothers, Constantine the *mega domestikos* and George the *protobestiarios*, kept close to their nephew, the Caesar Michael, in the palace. As long as imperial power resided solely with the empress Zoe, the heiress of the Macedonian dynasty, all their fortunes remained uncertain. She had adopted Michael, but it remained to be seen if she would make an imperial consort of him, or renege on the promise she – really, Michael IV and John – had made. Meanwhile she kept the reins of empire in hand. "With a young woman's energy she took on state affairs as advised by her father's eunuchs," conceded Skylitzes. "But she did not keep that up very long. Faced with the huge responsibility of running the empire, she realized she could not do the job on her own."

Seen from a modern perspective, this attitude, of both the empress and her advisors, is partly a result of the patriarchy of the times. In truth, though, the vain, frivolous Zoe was simply not cut out for governing. She did not mind giving orders – enjoyed it, even – but the drudgery of running a bureaucracy took too much time away from her beauty regimen. She needed someone at her side to prop her up against the Paphlagonians.

Harald, as a captain among the imperial bodyguards, would have been always at her side. And as a prince himself – by this time well known as such – he would have been able to offer not just his protection, but his insight as a leader of men. He was not yet a ruler, but his blood was royal. Together, with thousands of imperial guardsmen backing him and the love of the people behind her, what might Harald and Zoe have accomplished?

The *Orphanotrophos* and his brothers literally couldn't afford to give her time to mull it over. Bad enough that a Varangian might sit on the throne. Given enough time without an emperor, he might simply steal it. There was a curious Byzantine custom called *polutasvarf* – palace pillaging – by which, according to Snorri, the Varangians, on the death of an emperor, were allowed to ransack the imperial palace and treasury and make off with as much loot as they could carry. Admittedly, the idea of Ulf, Halldor and the rest lugging armfuls of gold out of the palace might seem unbelievable, but similar customs had existed in Rome on the death of a pope or bishop, and in Baghdad on the death of a caliph. However, Byzantine accounts make no mention of this custom, and modern historians question the accuracy of Snorri's interpretation.

That said, if Harald was not up on his imperial history, Zoe probably was – and John the *Orphanotrophos* certainly was – aware of Old Rome's Praetorian Guard, precursors to the Varangians. They had started out as bodyguards to the western caesars and ended up choosing them.

John wasted no more time. He returned to the palace. The brothers and their nephew immediately cornered the empress and set to work swaying her opinion. With all the profuse flattery to which Zoe was famously susceptible, they promised their nephew – her adopted son – would rule only in her name. Hers, after all, was the blood of the Porphyrogenitores, hers the right to rule. Michael, even as emperor, would be little more than an extension of her will.

Harald and his guardsmen had to stand by while all this cajolery went on. It was not their duty to voice a public opinion. Had Zoe given the nod to the

Varangians (who, remember, also functioned as imperial police and enforcers), Harald would have taken his *spatha* to John and his entire family, including Michael, and rid Zoe of them forever. As it was, it is almost impossible to think that Harald, even if denied any official input, was not able to offer informal advice, and that he did not have some influence on Zoe, who desired to banish the elder Paphlagonians. According to Skylitzes, it was her wish that John the *Orphanotrophos* was to be sent to the monastery of Monobata in far eastern Anatolia, Constantine to his estate in the Opsikion Theme, and George to his estate in Paphlagonia.

For the *Orphanotrophos* and his brothers, however, what the empress wanted and what she would get were two different things. Everything depended on who controlled Michael once he wore the crown, but first Zoe had to agree to his accession. In the end she had little choice. Michael, her son, was Caesar. Trusting him to do what was right, she duly appeared before the people, urging them to maintain order, and then turned over the government to the Paphlagonians.

And so Michael was crowned, according to the elaborate affair set down by Zoe's ancestor, the emperor Constantine VII, in the *Book of Ceremonies*. With all due solemnity, the Caesar, attended by the patriarch Alexios (conducting his fourth coronation), led the slow procession of consuls, senators, patricians, ambassadors and dignitaries from the palace to the Hagia Sophia. Amid much lighting of candles and singing of hymns by the choir, the patriarch blessed the imperial purple *chlamys* and saw it draped over Michael, and then blessed the imperial crown itself and saw it placed on Michael's brow. The attendees called three times, "Holy, holy, holy, glory to God in the highest and peace on earth," wishing him to be "a great *basileus* and *autokrator*, many years."

Thereupon Michael V, seated on the throne, accepted the devotion of a long line of nobles, prostrating themselves before him and rising to kiss his knees. *Magistroi* and consuls; senators, patricians and priests; generals of the army and guard units; *kandidatoi* of the cavalry and infantry; the *droungarioi* and *komites* of the fleets, on and on. And that was before his acclamation by the *demoi*, the Blue and Green political factions. This was conducted by a long list of prayer-and-response chants between their leaders, the *demokratoi*, and the people, culminating in the final wish that the emperor would "make full your years together with the empress and children born in the purple, for the

perfect guardianship of the Roman people."

All in all, a long day of pomp and pageantry, and tedium, for a young fighting man accustomed to action. Harald and Zoe would have both been present, though of course there's no record of whether, on Harald's rising to kiss her adopted son's knees, any look passed between them. Or, if it had, whether the new emperor Michael V took note.

Practically the moment Michael assumed the crown, the mask came off.

"The man was a slave to his emotions, erratic, triggered by the slightest provocation to anger and hate," wrote Psellos. Both Zoe and John had believed they could control him, even as emperor. Both were mistaken.

That role fell to his uncle Constantine. He had been buttering up the Caesar prior to the accession, and now enjoyed the payoff. Not only was his banishment rescinded, he took over as prime minister – deputy emperor, formerly John's position – and with Michael's backing gave vent to all his old jealousy and hatred of the *Orphanotrophos*, the two of them working together to cut John out of the picture. No surprise, then, that Michael raised Constantine to the rank of *nobelissimos*, Most Noble, one step below Caesar and crucially above that of *Orphanotrophos*.

And Michael did not stop there, but set about totally transforming the imperial government. Senators and patricians who bowed to his will were rewarded. Those who did not were ostracized. His munificence extended even to releasing political prisoners, among them Harald's old nemesis Maniakes, despite (or perhaps because of) his public shaming of the emperor's late father, the admiral Stephen. It was all part of a plan to transfer power from the aristocracy, who were few, to the people, and thereby create a new power bloc owing allegiance strictly to Michael.

John must have been horrified to see all his years of work go to waste, yet worse was to come. The ex-*Orphanotrophos* was banished in accordance with Zoe's original wish. At that, he was luckier than most of Michael's family. Those who were not already eunuchs, even those who were fathers and high officers of the state, were ordered castrated, removing the possibility that any of them might usurp Michael as sire of the new Paphlagonian dynasty.

Yet there was another obstacle to that plan, the last person standing

between the emperor and total power: Zoe. Michael could not stand that he owed everything to her. “Once he had addressed her as ‘mistress’,” wrote Psellos, “but now the very idea made him want to bite off his own tongue and spit it away in disgust.”

The empress’s inability to bear children, due to her advancing age, made her useless to Michael’s designs. The problem was, though she would never be mother to his children, she was still mother to her people. For all her foibles, they loved her wholeheartedly, which only made Michael despise her more. As had his uncle Michael IV, he shut her out of court life, blocked her access to the imperial treasury, and had her watched every minute.

The Varangians were the natural choice to guard her, but given Zoe’s relationship with Harald, there was the possibility that when put to the test the Varangians might take her side as well. Michael’s distrust of the Guard is well documented. He took steps against them, as Psellos wrote:

> For his personal bodyguard, he manned the corps with new blood, Scythian [i.e., Rus, Bulgarian or even Pecheneg] slaves whom he had bought. They were all eunuchs. They knew what was required of them, and were perfectly suited to accomplish it. Their loyalty was unquestioned, because it was to him that they owed their rise to the highest levels. Some he employed in actual guard duties, but others he sent on various other tasks that he wished done.

Top priority among these “various other tasks” was removing the Varangians from the picture. It was Maniakes, eager to please his imperial benefactor and surely not happy to find his old rival Harald elevated to such a high position as *spatharokandidatos*, who told Michael, “Let us test him, lord, by sending armed men to see how he performs his duty.”

The skalds left the details of the plot to the imagination, but at some point it boiled down to Michael’s eunuchs against Harald’s Varangians – perhaps a fight picked in some alehouse frequented by the Norse, or a sudden invasion of the Guard barracks, or a simple ambush in some dark alley – in any case, a quick flurry of Scythian swords against Varangian axes, in which Harald and his men performed their duties just fine. “When Nordbrikt was alerted to these men,” the *Morkinskinna* relates, “he ordered them all killed. A great number of the emperor’s men died.”

Alive or dead, they achieved the same effect. If matters had gotten to the point that the emperor’s new guardsmen were attacking the empress’s old guardsmen, it couldn’t be a good time for Harald and his men to show their faces in the throne room. Best to make themselves scarce, to go underground

until things were sorted out. Their escape did not sit well with Michael, and Maniakes was sent off to Italy to redeem himself. Regardless, Michael was committed now. Having moved against Zoe's guards, he had to move against the empress.

Before he struck, however, he was careful to make sure he had the people on his side. He proclaimed an imperial procession on Low Sunday (the Sunday after Easter, called St. Thomas Sunday among Eastern Christians), April 18, 1042. Wearing his crown, accompanied by his eunuch guards and the senators and aristocrats whose loyalty he had bought, he led the way along the *Mese* toward the Hagia Sophia, gratified to find the city aflutter with decorations and the populace pouring their hearts out with good cheer. Who else could they be celebrating, but he who presented himself as champion of the people, their emperor Michael V?

As soon as he returned to the palace, he ordered the patriarch Alexios I, who had opposed the previous power grab by the *Orphanotrophos*, away to his monastery of Stoudios, in the southernmost part of the city on the Marmara shore, to await upon him the next day. Michael went so far as to give Alexios four pounds of gold to pay for the reception, though more to allay any suspicions on the part of the priest. The patriarch obediently took his leave, and as soon as he was gone the emperor ordered a detachment of his Scythians to follow and arrest the priest in his own sanctuary. That left Zoe all alone.

Michael, who not long before couldn't have dared to kiss the hem of his adoptive mother's gown, sent his guards to drag her from her chamber. She of the purple blood was caught totally off guard. In that same evening, she stood accused of attempting to poison the emperor (as, all were reminded, she had supposedly poisoned the previous two emperors), was subjected to a quick show trial complete with perjured witnesses, pronounced guilty, and sentenced to exile.

Prinkipo – in modern times Buyukada, Turkish for "Big Island" – is the largest of the nine Prince's Islands in the Sea of Marmara. Five hundred years earlier, Emperor Justinian II (the nominative prince) had built a palace and monastery there, but over the centuries they served more often as palaces in exile. In the 8th century the convent was rebuilt by Empress Irene, who banished her son Constantine VI there after having him blinded, and was herself exiled to it in 802, followed by her granddaughter Empress

Euphrosyne a generation later, and the “Red Empress” Theophano in 969. Now this unhappy place was to be Zoe’s home as well.

Psellos wrote, “She was immediately put on a ship, along with certain men who were given free hand to insult her.” We can assume these certain men were Michael’s eunuchs, for if not, the ex-empress of Christendom might well have been raped. As it was, she was stripped of her silken imperial robes, and that was just the beginning. “Her captors were ordered to tonsure her and bring her hair back to Michael,” wrote Skylitzes, “and they obeyed.”

“In his arrogance Michael no longer realized what he was doing,” concurred Matthew of Edessa. “He dared to cut the hair off Zoe Porphyrogenita, daughter of Emperor Constantine, as though she was a common whore, and to banish her to an island in chains.”

Afterward Psellos actually spoke to some of those aboard the ship, who told him that Zoe, shorn of her glorious locks and clad in a coarse nun’s habit, wept and called upon her ancestors for salvation, in particular her illustrious late uncle, Basil II, the Bulgar Slayer. But Basil was long gone, and she knew nothing of her latter-day Burner of Bulgars, Harald. Nor do we, for not even the skalds divulge much of his doings at this time. By some interpretations of the chronicles – this is another part of the story in which the ancients confuse dates and even emperors – Harald and Ulf and Halldor might have been in prison.

Meanwhile Michael sold his story to the citizenry of Constantinople, starting with the senate. He reeled off a long list of Zoe’s crimes, revealed how he had long suspected her, and how many times he had covered up for her to avoid troubling the senators. They – for those remaining owed their position to Michael – made all the proper noises. With their acquiescence, Michael then took his case to the people, or at least the *demokratoi* who led the Blue and Green factions. Perceiving the emperor’s intent, they duly fell into line as well.

The choice was never actually put to the people themselves. What commoners wanted mattered as little to the aristocrats and patricians in the palace as their own opinions mattered to the emperor. As soon as he dismissed them all, according to his secretary Psellos, Michael all but danced a little celebratory jig in the throne room, and why not? He was the most powerful man in the world, the progenitor of a new, Paphlagonian dynasty that – if his descendants were as ruthless as he – might well endure for

centuries. There was still the loose end of Harald and his guardsmen to resolve, but without the Varangians, overthrowing Michael V would require nothing less than a city-wide rebellion.

XIII

REVOLUTION

No one has ever dared to rise up against the Emperor and destroy the peace of Byzantium, who has not suffered his own destruction. So for this reason I advise you, my beloved children, whom God has granted me, to remain always on the side of the Emperor, and in his service. For the Emperor in Constantinople always wins.

Kekaumenos

By Monday morning rumors of Zoe's banishment were emanating from the palace into the streets of Constantinople like the stench wafting off a corpse.

"Throughout the city," remembered Psellos, "a feeling of foreboding and uncertainty gradually rose to the surface. It was as if the natural rhythm of the city had been upset. The underswell of apprehension soon spread everywhere. Everyone was worried about the empress. Deep down men knew matters had gotten out of hand and they were not afraid to speak up about it."

Michael spent the morning crafting a proclamation and ordered the patrician Anastasios, the city *eparchos* (prefect or governor) who had once served Zoe's father Constantine VIII, to read it out in the Forum of Constantine the Great, the circular plaza astride the *Mese* in the heart of the city. As he arrived at the foot of the great purple Column of Constantine in the center of the forum, the crowd flowed in through the two monumental gates to the east and west, surrounding him. With admirable bravery he began to read aloud in the name of the *autokrator*, the *basileus*, Emperor Michael V: "Because Zoe has revealed herself to be indisposed to my reign, I have

sent her away, and Alexios, her willing accomplice, has been banished from the church. As for you, my subjects, keep up your reverence for me and you will receive great glory and rewards, not to mention a stable and peaceful life."

The reaction of the crowd to these tidings was not as Michael expected, but as Anastasios no doubt feared.

"When the empress's sad fate became common knowledge," recalled Attaleiates, who witnessed the scene, "the word spread rapidly, and you could see everyone's mood instantly turn sour. Instead of the honor and praise they had showered on the emperor, there rose up an irresistible surge of hatred."

If Harald and his men were not in prison, as some interpretations of the skalds have it, they would certainly have hidden themselves in this crowd to learn the emperor's intent. They would have heard it when somebody shouted out – and may even have shouted themselves – "We want no cross-trampling caulker as emperor. We want our original and hereditary ruler, our mother Zoe!"

In that moment the crowd turned to a mob. The chant went up, "Let the caulker's bones be broken!"

"They all rushed the *eparchos*, roaring, yelling, full of rage and hate," remembered Attaleiates. "They smashed up the merchants' stands and used the pieces as weapons, going hand-to-hand against the imperial [Scythian] guards and the *eparchos*' men."

Anastasios only barely escaped the forum with his life. The mob poured out after him, up the *Mese* toward the palace, men producing swords and spears as their women, normally penned up in their homes but now lamenting the loss of their mother Zoe, urged them onward. Psellos remembered standing at the palace gates when the crowd surged into the great square, and knowing better than to hang around: "I immediately mounted my horse, and riding off through the midst of the city I saw with my own eyes sights which even now I can hardly believe."

Bells began to ring from the Hagia Sophia, where the mob had found no less than the patriarch Alexios in hiding, only too glad to join their uprising. When Michael's Scythian eunuchs had come banging on the door of his monastery at Stoudios, he had offered them a bribe for his escape, and lo, they had accepted. Such would have been unheard of among Varangians, but

seeing his would-be captors happily on their way, Alexios had hurried through the darkened city to the great church to plot his counterstroke, sending word to various sympathetic senators and patricians for help.

By this time most of the aristocrats – particularly any Paphlagonians who were left – had more immediate concerns. As if castration was not enough punishment for mere relation to the emperor, now the rioters stormed their mansions and even the churches and monasteries they had founded, looting everything that could be carried off and destroying the rest. Michael's uncle, the *nobelissimos* Constantine, had to break out of his own house with armed retainers to make his way to the palace, where he found the emperor cowering in indecision.

Michael had so far considered this no more than a riot. Realizing now that he faced an uprising, and unsure how to handle it – whether to flee, or to stay and fight – he was not even sure he could trust his own guards. "Even some of his mercenaries were of wavering loyalty and no longer obeying orders," recalled Psellos, meaning Michael's Scythian slaves, "while others turned completely hostile, and the moment their discipline broke they went over to the mob."

These deserters from the Guard could be none other than the remaining Varangians, who had taken the assault on their leader Harald as the breaking point. Psellos specifically said the mob was armed mostly with stones, but many with swords, spears and axes, the characteristic weapon of the Varangians. And if Harald and his lieutenants had in fact up to this point been in prison, there was no contrived escape plan necessary to see them free, for Attaleiates plainly stated the mob's first priority: "Some of them broke into the prisons and freed the prisoners, who joined in the uprising."

"Then all of Constantinople rose up against this Caesar," recounted Matthew of Edessa, "and there was a frightful battle inside the city, with slaughter on both sides. Blood ran in the streets, including inside Saint Sophia."

By Monday afternoon large parts of the city lay in ruin. Valgard, of Vollur in Iceland, years later one of Harald's skalds but in 1042 one of his Varangians, recorded the scene in verse: "The flames licked the stones, crackling embers shot from the soot, and columns of smoke rose vertically up from the tumbling houses."

The Great Palace was under siege. With his uncle Constantine giving him

fresh courage, Michael ordered his remaining troops out to put down the revolt. The Scythians took the high ground on the rooftops and walls of the palace and began raining stones, spears and arrows down on the mob. As the emperor hoped, the sudden counterattack dampened some of the rebels' passion. Leaving a considerable number of casualties in the square, they withdrew out of range to consider their next move, not to mention to find a leader.

Yet Michael and Constantine knew they couldn't hold out forever. Somehow they had to appease the mob. If the rebels wanted Zoe, then Zoe they would get. A boat was dispatched from the palace harbor to fetch her back from Prinkipo.

After the frantic events of Sunday night, the former empress had accepted her lot, simply glad to still be alive. She barely had to time to become accustomed to her sparse quarters in the convent before she was taken into custody again. Still in her nun's habit, she was hustled up from the palace docks before the emperor and *nobelissimos*, all the while fearing they had revised her punishment from exile to blinding or even death.

Even in their current predicament, however, Michael and Constantine refused to cede any power. They needed Zoe to calm the mob, nothing more. She was no longer an empress, nor would she be. She was to remain a nun, and if she refused to cooperate, her life was forfeit. All their lives would be forfeit.

"That was why she took no opportunity for revenge, blamed the tyrant for all that had gone wrong, or so much as changed her manner," claimed Psellos. "In fact she sympathized, even shedding tears at his distress."

A romantic might have it that Zoe should have preferred death to such dishonor, but really, what else could she do? Sheltered all her life, she had in the past twenty-four hours been treated as a criminal. She who had held others' lives in her hands had suddenly known her own existence to be in the balance. The imperial blood on which she had relied all her days was worth nothing. Zoe had no power, no one on her side, no one to save her. No Harald.

Of course she submitted to the Paphlagonians' demands. And so she was promptly trotted out via the private passage to the *Kathisma*, the emperor's

box in the Hippodrome, where Michael put her on display for the mob.

"He tried to address the citizenry," recorded Skylitzes, "to tell them he had brought their empress back and that everything was back to normal, but they would no longer listen."

Having heard of the empress's banishment and return, where else would Harald be but among the crowd in the stadium? And like them, looking up in shock to see their glorious Augusta in humble robes, her famous golden hair shorn off, being offered up like a sacrificial lamb.

It had been a little over 500 years since Emperor Justinian I had ordered the 30,000 Constantinopolitans killed, right there in that very arena. But Michael the Caulker was no Justinian. The people no longer feared him, Harald least of all. If the mob needed a leader, they had one now. "Scorn rained on him from all sides," wrote Skylitzes of the emperor. "Stones and arrows shot up from the track."

With Michael's Scythian slaves covering their retreat, the imperial party hurried back into the passage to the safety of the palace, leaving confusion in their wake. For none could tell if Zoe had been acting under duress, or of her own free will. Was she Michael's prisoner, or his willing accomplice?

Across the great plaza in the Hagia Sophia, the patriarch Alexios had been gathering round him the support of those senators and patricians who felt the winds of fortune changing direction. Now he reminded them all that Zoe was not the only Porphyrogenita in town. The eldest, Eudokia, had since died, but for eleven years the empress's younger sister Theodora had been locked away in her convent at Petrion, in the city's northwestern hills.

The mob promptly poured across town to fetch her, and if a new empress was in the offing, Varangians would have gone along to assure her protection, with Harald at their head. Yet when they came banging on the convent doors, Theodora, too used to being a nun, was not ready to be an empress. Psellos admitted, "Astounded by this unexpected sight, she at first refused to give in to their pleading and shut herself up in the church, closing her ears to every appeal."

Duty called, however, and it was not taking no for an answer. The throng barged their way inside, confronted the prospective empress at the altar, and all but dragged her outside. "Theodora was put on a horse and surrounded by a stately and imposing escort of heavily armed guards," remembered Attaleiates, and there were no more stately and imposing guards in the city

than Harald and his Varangians. Parting the crowd before her – no doubt swinging their *manglabia* as they had ahead of Michael IV and Michael V and Romanos III and Constantine VIII to clear the way – they returned through the city to the Hagia Sophia, where Alexios awaited her arrival.

"She was paid homage," conceded Psellos, "no longer by just some of the populace, but by all the patricians as well. Everyone, with utter scorn for the tyrant, and loud acclaim for her, declared Theodora empress."

Thus, come Tuesday morning, there was an emperor and two empresses of Byzantium. Nobody could be sure Zoe hadn't taken Michael's side. But overnight Theodora, having come to terms with her destiny, set aside her reluctance and seized the reins of power with both hands. Summoning the city magistrates and officials to her side, she declared Michael – though, importantly, not Zoe – an apostate, and set about forming a new government.

For his part Michael had just about run out of nerve. News of Theodora's elevation came as a terrible shock, since according to Psellos he hadn't even known Zoe had a sister: "This emperor not only had no idea who Theodora was, or if she was of imperial blood, but as far as he was concerned, she might never have been born at all."

"He gave up hope and consented to be tonsured at Stoudios' monastery," declared Skylitzes, "but the domestic [Constantine] would not allow it, saying that he should not so quickly abandon the throne and quit. He should instead put up a stiff resistance and either win total victory or die a brave and honorable death, befitting an emperor."

They were strengthened in their resolve by the fortuitous return, that very day, of Harald's old compatriot, the general Katakalon Kekaumenos, fresh from his triumphant defense of Messina. With Maniakes taking over again in Italy, the general had brought along those replacement Varangians who had managed to survive the debacle in Italy. They, naturally knowing nothing of recent events, promptly took the emperor's side, seeing that as still their duty. The ensuing battle would set Varangian against Varangian, and at the end of it whoever held the palace would hold the empire.

"At dawn courageous warriors assaulted the palace under a rain of arrows," recalled Attaleiates, "with their shouting accompanied by the blaring of trumpets and bugles." Keeping the defenders' heads down, the rebels – no

longer an uncontrolled mob but, with those Varangian veterans filling out their ranks, showing a degree of strategy and tactics – launched their all-out attack. While one contingent assaulted the main gate and guard barracks, another swept in from the left, across the palace polo field, and a third went right, pouring into the Hippodrome to attack via the emperor's box and its private entrance to the palace. "The emperor's guards divided themselves into thirds and defended themselves as best they could," wrote Skylitzes. "There was heavy loss of life among the citizens, for they were unarmored and armed only with sticks and stones and whatever else came to hand, but fighting trained men-at-arms."

When Harald's men came up against those of Kekaumenos, there was a scene of combat rarely witnessed in the history of the Byzantine Empire: Varangian against Varangian, axe versus axe. Besides shearing off heads and limbs with relative ease, the Dane axe could be hooked behind an opponent's ankle to pull his foot from beneath him, behind a shield to tear it from his grasp, or behind his neck to pull his head down for a finishing blow. The pointed, sharpened beaks or horns of the axe blade, called *oxarhyrna*, served as stabbing and slashing weapons themselves, and the thick man-high handle could function as a quarterstaff to parry blows from either a Scythian saber or Byzantine *spatha.*

Between battling Varangians – brothers of the axe – there was, perhaps, some measure of mercy. Between Varangian and Scythian, how could there be any? And between the emperor's men and the rebellious citizens, there was none. Skylitzes estimated no fewer than 3,000 people were killed in the struggle, making it one of the bloodiest days in the history of the city. Eventually, by dint of sheer numbers, the emperor's guards were overwhelmed. Kekaumenos and at least some of his Varangians were taken alive. In the thick of it, Harald had to wonder if he would reach Zoe before Michael and Constantine decided she was of no more use. Or if he would find she really had gone over to their side after all.

Sometime near evening he burst out into the open on the palace grounds to find the insurgents had forced the gates and stormed inside. The attack, however, almost immediately bogged down as the mob stood in awe of greater riches than they had ever imagined. Gold-trimmed furnishings, magnificent tapestries, the renowned Byzantine mosaic work, fountains running with wine. Suddenly revolution was forgotten. They immediately set

to looting, a scene of Varangian-style *polutasvarf* on a grand scale.

The pause was all Michael and Constantine needed. By the time Harald reached the imperial quarters, the emperor and his *nobelissimos* had escaped down to the palace harbor, boarded an imperial yacht, and were gone.

But they left the former empress behind. Given her reception by the crowd at the Hippodrome the day before, Zoe could certainly not have been blamed for cowering in some dark corner, expecting to be put to the sword the moment she was discovered by the fickle mob. The difference might well have come down to Harald finding her before they did, in which case history confirms he fulfilled his duty as a Varangian. They say the crowd lifted their careworn *basilissa* on their shoulders, carried her to the throne and set her down upon it. Zoe was an empress again, in no small thanks to her prince from the far north.

XIV

Blinding

The king gained even more gold;
The Greek emperor went stone-blind from the great injury.

Thorarinn Skeggjason

Now came the hard part.

Though for the moment no one knew whether he and his uncle Constantine were not somewhere already plotting to resurrect it, Michael's Paphlagonian dynasty had fallen in just two days. The House of Macedonia once again ruled Byzantium, and those to the purple born once again sat on the throne.

At least, one of them did. Zoe, the once and rightful empress, had been restored by right of conquest, not least due to Harald and the Varangian Guard. But her sister Theodora, proclaimed empress by will of the people – and no less by the power of the Varangians – also ruled from her sanctuary in the Hagia Sophia, just across the Great Square.

Tuesday, April 20, 1042, was a day unique in the entire thousand-year history of the Byzantine Empire. With no man between them, not one, but two women held viable, opposing claims to the imperial throne, both with imperial blood, each famously hating the other, separated by just a few hundred yards and a few hundred Danish axes. With Constantinople holding its breath to see if a spat between sisters would turn into civil war, matters became even more complicated when it was proclaimed that Michael and Constantine had been found.

Rather than seek to escape the city entirely, the two had taken a ship from

the palace harbor just a short way up the Marmara shore of the city to the monastery of Stoudios, the very abbey in which they had sought to trap the patriarch Alexios just forty-eight hours before. They had not only claimed sanctuary but submitted to be tonsured and assume the robes of supplicants, throwing themselves on God's mercy.

"As soon as word spread throughout the city," recalled Psellos, "men's hearts, up to now filled with apprehension and grim determination, were relieved of that weight. Some thanked God for saving them, others acclaimed the new empress, while the commoners danced in the marketplaces."

An ex-emperor on the loose took precedence over any squabbles between empresses. How they chose to handle it, however, shows how much they had been affected by the sudden changes in their lives. Empress Zoe – the recently accused murderess, now fresh off her own brush with mortality – spoke to the senate and addressed the people from a palace balcony, appealing to them to show mercy for Michael. Skylitzes sniffed, "She was actually feeling sorry for the pitiful monster."

Surely even Harald had a hard time swallowing this. He still had fresh blood on his hands for Zoe's sake, and not the slightest reason for good will toward Michael. This may be the exact moment when, whatever their relationship had been thus far, we see something come between the triumphant young champion and the aging, cowed empress.

Some of the common people might have deluded themselves that Michael had relinquished his claim to the throne, but too many knew he might reassert it later. They had had enough of the Caulker. "They all shouted as one," recorded Skylitzes. "'Death to the murderer! Let us be rid of the criminal! Impale him! Crucify him! Blind him!'"

Empress Theodora, flexing her imperial muscles, ordered her newly appointed city *eparchos*, Nikephoros Kampanares, to mount a guard over the fugitives. Kampanares, formerly a *krites* or judge in the Thracesian Theme, seems to have been somewhat in over his head. "I myself went along with him (I was his personal friend)," excused Psellos. "Actually, he asked me to advise him and help in carrying out his orders."

They ran into an angry crowd gathered outside the monastery and, entering with difficulty, found the ex-*basileus* and former *nobelissimos* clinging to the altar, pleading for their lives. Constantine blamed everything on Michael: "If I had tried to hold him back, I would have been punished for it. He was too

stubborn in his reckless ambition. If I had been able to restrain him, the rest of my family would not have been put to the fire and sword."

Michael confessed as much. "Truly, God is just, and I deserve to pay for what I have done."

Kampanares and Psellos, who admitted being driven to tears himself, were, like Zoe, ready to forgive and forget: "Most of us there felt sorry for them."

The former tyrants might have escaped retribution altogether if not for the arrival of a guard detachment from the palace. As Psellos learned later, a swift debate had gone on in his absence. Theodora's supporters, aware dithering Zoe was more likely to promote another commoner to the throne or – worse – return Michael to it rather than see her sister on it, demanded death for the tyrants. The moderates in the senate, however, felt a lesser punishment would suffice. Before it came to a vote, Theodora acted on her own prerogative. "Bold, determined men were sent with all dispatch," Psellos wrote, "with instructions to blind the fugitives as soon as they came out of the church."

Their commander was none other than Harald. It should be pointed out that the accounts of neither Psellos nor Kekaumenos implicate the Varangian leader in this incident. Indeed Psellos, who must frequently have crossed paths with Harald in the palace and known him to be of royal blood but, as a Byzantine, never considered him anything more than a lowly, foreign-born mercenary and bodyguard, never mentioned him by name. Neither does Kekaumenos, who devotes an entire section of his text to "Araltes," connect him with this incident. Our knowledge of Harald's involvement comes from Scandinavian sources, which are here admittedly sketchy. The *Morkinskinna*, for instance, has Harald not only escaping from prison but breaking into no less than the imperial bedchamber to exact personal revenge. Snorri repeated that version, with a disclaimer: "It is said that Harald blinded the Byzantine emperor himself. The skalds would surely have credited such an act to a duke or count or some other man of rank if they had known it to be true, but this is the story brought back by Harald himself and the men who were there."

It is certainly more believable that, rather than wreak his vengeance all on his own, Harald acted as the instrument of imperial will. According to Psellos, the emperor was not dragged out of bed, but from the sanctuary of church. Harald first ordered Michael and Constantine into the street, but when they clung to the altar, he stepped aside and let the mob tear them from

it. As Skylitzes heard, “The crowd, seething with rage on account of their dead, plucked them out of there and dragged them across the forum by the heels, far from the sacred monastery to the place called Sigma.”

This was a plaza or forum before a C-shaped protrusion of the city walls where the army could assemble before sallying out to the attack, but also large enough to hold the growing crowd eager to see bloody vengeance meted out. It was about one and a quarter miles north of the Stoudites monastery, so the journey gave Michael and Constantine plenty of time to repent of their sins. Michael proved himself detestable to the last.

Psellos recalled, “The emperor, overwhelmed by events and his bad luck, showed the same lack of character throughout the entire proceedings. He groaned and cried aloud. If anyone approached, he pleaded for help. He humbly called upon God and raised hands in prayer to heaven, to the church, to anything he could think of.”

Skylitzes took a more cold-blooded view. “Michael fervently begged to have his uncle blinded first, accusing him of being the primary source of all the evils that had overtaken the city,” he wrote. “And that is what happened.”

The *nobelissimos*, to his credit, lived up to his title. Seeing his inevitable fate, Constantine shook off his guards and addressed Harald directly. “You there, kindly keep the people back, in order to witness how bravely I bear my punishment.”

To prevent him from flailing as the penalty was administered, Harald ordered his men to bind their victim, but Constantine instead lay down on the spot. “Look, if you see me struggle, nail me down.”

Usually blinding was administered with red-hot irons to instantly cauterize the wounds, but Psellos does not mention any. There probably hadn’t been time to prepare such kindnesses. Thjodolf, who witnessed the act himself, said Harald performed the deed with a blade. Drawing his knife, or his *spatha*, he stood over Constantine, and as Psellos recorded with horrific dispassion, “His eyes were gouged out, one after the other. Meanwhile the emperor, seeing in his uncle’s suffering the fate that awaited him, already felt Constantine’s anguish, beating his fists, pounding his face and wailing in terror.”

The *nobelissimos*, bleeding from the eye sockets, got up on his own and attempted to address the crowd, but no one was interested in anything he had to say. They now turned on Michael. The ex-emperor pleaded and struggled,

but the Varangians held him down, and Harald likewise put his eyes out.

The sight of the tyrants brought low sated the mob's bloodlust. They left the two unfortunates to their fate.

"They were exiled," recounted Skylitzes, "Michael to the Elegmoi monastery [in northwest Asia Minor]…his relatives scattered to the four winds." Michael died that August, according to some sources after being castrated.

"Now the emperor, yesterday seated on a golden throne giving out orders to the entire world," recorded Aristakes, "was this day blinded, left with nothing but lost opportunity and scorn, and those who thought to rule forever over land and sea in an instant had lost everything."

"He and his entire family were wiped out in one day," remembered Kekaumenos. "For I saw the ex-emperor, lord Michael, who had in the morning been Caesar, a mighty emperor, but by the third hour of the day [i.e., ten o'clock Tuesday night, early Wednesday in Byzantine time], sorrowful, bereft and blind."

"Let their sorry story be remembered forever," opined Attaleiates, "and may it set anyone who is ungrateful to his patrons on a better path."

For Harald, wiping imperial blood from his blade on his way back to the palace, the more specific lesson was, do not cross a Porphyrogenita. For now he would serve two of them.

But let them, in turn, also be wary not to cross him. Thjodolf, Harald's loyal skald, captured the moment in verse:

> The champion who fed the wolves
> Ripped both the eyes
> From the emperor of Byzantium.
> It was war.
> The warrior-king of Norway
> Left his vengeful mark
> On the emperor of the East.
> The Greek king had betrayed him.

XV

Power

Be on your guard whenever you chat with a woman, even if she seems respectable enough, and do not become intimate with her, lest you never escape her wiles. Your eyes will see nothing but her, and your heart will feel nothing else, and you will be unable to think for yourself. You will be attacked from three sides, by the Devil, by her beauty and words, and by human nature. It is no small thing to overcome.

Kekaumenos

So the ex-emperor was out of the way, but the standoff between empresses had yet to be resolved. In the palace was Zoe, the empress reduced to a nun, and in the Hagia Sophia, Theodora, the nun raised into an empress. “When Zoe regained control of the empire she was inclined to banish her sister Theodora,” admitted Skylitzes, “but was prevented by the crowd insisting that they reign together.”

The senate could not, or would not, decide between the two, for each had the power to destroy the other, and her supporters along with her, and along with them all, Constantinople and Byzantium itself. Like it or not, Zoe had to extend an olive branch.

Harald’s role in all this goes unmentioned, but it is difficult to believe he had none. He and the Varangians would have stood against the entire city no better than had Michael’s Scythian eunuchs, but if it came to civil war – say, between the aristocratic Blues and working-class Greens, or pro-Zoe and pro-Theodora factions – their axes would again have been the deciding factor.

Like the Praetorian Guard of old Rome, the Varangians had become power brokers, making their leader Harald *de facto* kingmaker. And his advice – particularly in view of Zoe's recent cooperation with the tyrants Michael and Constantine, and his own recent protection of the younger Porphyrogenita, to whom he technically was still honor-bound – could have been nothing else but for Zoe to accept her sister's claim. Anything less meant war. More war. Civil war, the worst kind.

"And so they were declared co-empresses," recorded Attaleiates, "a notable event."

By imperial invitation, and in a magnificent procession, Theodora crossed the square into the palace, and Zoe welcomed her with open arms. For her part the younger sister was careful to mind her elder's station. In matters of protocol, Zoe acted as emperor, with Theodora taking the role of empress, sitting slightly behind her in the throne room while their delegates administered the bureaucracy, all well protected against any further insurrection. Psellos noted, "Beside them were the rods [*fasces*, symbolic of empire] and sword-bearers [*spatharioi*] and the guards armed with the *rhomphaia* [axes, i.e., Varangians]."

Neither being well trained nor inclined to deal with the minutiae of government, the empresses contented themselves to serve as figureheads and let their ministers do the governing, speaking up when duty required but mostly concerned with their own affairs. After her years of penury in the convent, Theodora did not hesitate to take advantage of her renewed access to the imperial treasury, as recompense for her service to the throne. Meanwhile Zoe dipped in to dole out promotions and honors to the senate and largesse to the mob. The two soon fell to squabbling again.

The situation was too unstable. In an empire always rife with rebellions and uprisings, some ambitious general or patrician would inevitably seek to back one empress against the other. It was already happening. The governor of Cyprus, Theophilos Erotikos, who had been appointed by the Paphlagonians, decided to test the waters. He cooked up a tax revolt on his island which saw several imperial officials killed, and began making noises about open rebellion. Such men did not take kindly to receiving orders from women. A strong emperor was required to bring them to heel.

For her part, the younger Porphyrogenita was willing to share power, but not her bed. According to Attaleiates, "Theodora agreed to Zoe's marriage,

but chose for herself the unwed life, to which she adhered from childhood into old age, unto to her last day."

As for Zoe, Aristakes wrote, "Following the brief reign of the Caesar, the lioness was roaring in her den for a mate. It greatly concerned her that none of her subjects was worthy of the role."

All agreed that an emperor should be created and married to Zoe, but who? "The next move," agreed Psellos, "was to search out and find the man of the most eminent bloodline and richest fortune, whether from the ranks of the senate or the army."

Of course they had just such a man already in their midst. Harald, of noble blood and with his own private treasure, was even then demonstrating his own ruthless ability to rule.

The Varangians had been split by the rebellion. Those loyal to Harald now reaped the rewards, and those who had taken Michael's side received their just desserts. True, they had fought to protect their emperor, but they had fought against those of the purple blood, the very personifications of empire. Worse, they had fought against Harald, and worst of all, they had lost. As a Byzantine, their general Kekaumenos was subject to the judgment of the empresses, who let him off unpunished. But Varangians by tradition (as with that rapist in the Thracesian Theme years before) punished violators in-house. Harald might not hold the rank of *Akolouthos* – the last known person to hold that office had been Michael V – but if he did not lead the Varangians in title, he led them in fact. He could brook no affront to his authority, and therefore set a brutal example. He ordered the traitors hanged.

Valgard of Vollur, the Icelander who would become one of Harald's court poets, lamented, "Prince, you ordered half the guardsmen to be hanged at once; you have done so that fewer Varangians remain." Half the Varangians in the city (excluding combat units out in the field, who would never have heard of the brief uprising until it was long over) could easily have come to dozens, perhaps hundreds of men. And recall that Byzantine hanging was not a clean snap-of-the-neck affair, but a hauling by the neck up a forked gibbet to die by slow strangulation. Droves of imperial guardsmen dying such harrowing deaths could have left no doubt in anyone's mind who was in charge in Constantinople.

With a smaller corps of Varangians at his back, but united in their dedication to him, Harald was now the power behind the Byzantine imperial

throne, and just one step away from sitting on it himself. For the first time, no emperor stood between him and Zoe, just as no man stood between her and the imperial treasury. The empress never hesitated to buy the love of those around her, and she considered their love to be worth a great deal. Even Psellos, while disdaining her behavior, all but named Harald among the beneficiaries of her largesse. “The wages for the soldiers and the revenues budgeted for the military were quite needlessly diverted,” he wrote, “and set aside for the use of others – a cluster of sycophants and those who were appointed to guard the empresses.”

Harald was earning every gold coin. Not yet thirty years old, he was rich, powerful, a golden-haired hero at the height of his career, the very pinnacle of empire. Zoe was in her mid-sixties, still beautiful, but beautiful for her age. If not for the money and power she could offer, she would not likely have gotten a man like Harald in her bed, let alone kept him there.

But Zoe had a record of putting handsome young men of whatever birth on the imperial throne, and Harald was quite obviously next in line. They must have shared some interesting pillow talk, this formidable pair, he with his military acumen, leadership ability and royal blood, she to the purple born, experienced in the politics of the court, both with a taste for power, both utterly ruthless. He could rule by might until she polished him to rule by finesse. Harald would certainly outlive her – well, given the extraordinary percentage of Byzantine emperors who were castrated, blinded, mutilated, beheaded or assassinated before their time (twenty-nine of ninety-four, almost one in every three), *probably* outlive her – and when she was gone, he could choose his own empress.

Emperor Araltes I of Byzantium. It had a nice ring to it. No less than Snorri confirmed, “Some Varangians who served as mercenaries in Constantinople brought north with them the story that, according to those in the know, Empress Zoe had wanted to marry Harald herself.”

There is the possibility, however – even the likelihood – that Zoe was not being honest with Harald. Byzantine emperors often took the daughters of foreign kings to wife for political reasons, but such queens were always subservient to them. Zoe’s husband would be the supreme power in the empire. She had to know her senators, patricians and generals would never accept a foreign mercenary on the throne, particularly a Varangian, let alone a kinsman of Grand Prince Yaroslav of Kiev. In 988 Emperor Basil II had

invited 6,000 Varangians to become his personal army, but a Varangian emperor might well, by treaty of alliance, invite the entire Kievan army into his service. How would the rest of the army, the Greeks and other foreign mercenaries, take that? Would it make the Kievan empire part of the Byzantine, or the other way around? Or would it simply mean empire-wide civil war? Zoe, as senior empress, had to consider other candidates – Byzantine candidates – to become her husband.

To Harald this revelation could come as nothing but a slap in the face. Remember that in 969, when Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas was stabbed to death in his sleep by his nephew John Tzimiskes, the Varangians had acclaimed the murderer as emperor. Harald was within a sword's swing of the throne. That he did not take the opportunity to attempt a coup, then and there, demonstrates not that he accepted his fate or that his sense of honor precluded treachery, but that he recognized the Byzantine bias against a foreign usurper, could foresee the bloodbath that would ensue, and decided to bide his time. Harald was not the kind of man to suffer insults, but neither was he the kind of man to murder an empress.

He was, however, the kind to nurse a grudge until the time was right to strike back.

There was then conducted a most curious sequence of auditions for the role of emperor, of imperial husband and ruler. The pool of applicants was not large. All were named Constantine.

The first, Constantine Dalassenos (from Dalassa, modern Talas in eastern Turkey), had been *doux* of Antioch and the original choice of Zoe's father, Constantine VIII, to marry her. He had proven too arrogant and hard to handle then, and been passed over in favor of the more pliant Romanos, whose ill-fated campaign of 1030 in Armenia was said to have failed in large part due to Dalassenos' inept command. The intervening years hadn't softened this Constantine, who was probably ten years older than Zoe. At his interview he demonstrated a lack of tact, unwillingness to compromise on his own ideas of how the empire should be run, and insufficient deference to the empress. She sent him packing back to Anatolia.

The second, the *katepano* Constantine Artoklines (*artoklines* being the job of arranging and enforcing rank and dignities at court), was said to have been

Zoe's lover while she was married to Romanos and before Michael IV, who had therefore banished him from the capital. This Constantine, said to be of handsome appearance and commanding manner, met with Zoe's approval despite being married. Alas, he died before he could divorce his wife and assume the throne. (Skylitzes said she, rather than lose him, poisoned him.)

The third Constantine, called Monomachos (of an ancient line of aristocrats, the Monomachi, "one who fights alone"), had been in his youth a champion pentathlete, also rumored to have been Zoe's lover, and also banished by Michael IV, to Mytilene on the island of Lesbos in the Aegean, just off the Anatolian coast. He had been married twice, the second time to a niece of Romanos III, and widowed twice. In the spring of 1042 he was a judge in Greece when Zoe, who had not seen him in seven years, remembered him. About fifteen years older than Harald, and twenty-five years younger than Zoe, Constantine, despite his noble blood, was a low-level civil servant, lacking military experience and not especially trained to rule an empire. From Harald's perspective, he was an ideal candidate who could be manipulated – or assassinated – as the need arose.

Psellos made specific mention of Harald's advice in the matter, and how the empress valued it over and above even that of the patricians at court: "She freely discussed the subject with her personal bodyguard and household staff, and when she saw their unanimous support of [the third] Constantine as the future emperor she then informed the senate of her intentions."

She sent an intimate, the eunuch of her bedchamber, Stephen Pergamenos, to offer Constantine robes of imperial purple and bring him by *dromon* to the capital. The entire city turned out in a spectacular festival to greet their new ruler. "An imperial tent was pitched for him," recalled Psellos, "surrounded by an imperial guard."

As chief imperial guardsman, Harald's first impression of his new emperor-to-be has gone unrecorded. Constantine was said to be charming and stunningly handsome. A mosaic of him in the Hagia Sophia survives, though the only distinctive features showing out from under the jewel-encrusted imperial robes and crown are brown eyes and a dark beard showing gray. He would be Psellos's favorite among the emperors he served: "No man was better equipped to win his subjects' love. He was naturally gregarious, gaining everyone's affection with a skill that was deliberate, yet unaffected. His was no false charm, but a sincere desire to make friends, a real desire to

please.”

If Harald, though, had any worries about this effete social climber replacing him in Zoe’s affections, they were quickly allayed. The new emperor did not come without baggage.

When his second wife died, Constantine had taken up with her widowed niece, Maria Skleraina. (Both were daughters of the powerful Skleros family, whose fortunes had been intertwined with that of the empire going back two centuries.) Byzantine law forbade a third marriage for him – and, for that matter, Zoe as well, an issue that would need addressing – but Maria was so devoted that she had followed him into exile and remained his constant companion for seven years. As imperial secretary Psellos was, like Harald as head of the imperial bodyguard, in attendance when Constantine, on their first meeting, told Zoe about Maria. Not a wife, not even a mistress, he explained, but merely a fellow victim of the Paphlagonians, like him and Zoe. He had left her behind, but surely a place could be found for her in the capital?

Zoe was not fooled. She may even have been relieved. Whatever their past, her marriage to Constantine was a business matter, not a love match. “The empress immediately consented,” recorded Psellos. “The fact is, Zoe was beyond such concerns. She had suffered enough trouble, and at any rate was now too old for jealousy.”

That, and her own lover was close at hand. Wielding an axe.

A delegation was immediately sent from the capital to fetch this Maria, who had been anxiously awaiting word of the imperial decision regarding her fate. The natural assumption was that she would be seen as a threat to the imperial marriage. “Dreading the empress, she anticipated terrible vengeance and expected the worst,” wrote Psellos, “when suddenly messengers arrived with an imperial bodyguard, begging her to return to Byzantium.”

This messenger was probably Zoe’s eunuch again, Stephen Pergamenos, who had originally been sent out for Constantine, thereby beginning his own rise to some power. And it is a good bet his bodyguard was led by none other than Harald himself. Zoe would have every reason to get her lover out of the city while she went about the business of taking a new husband. On June 11, 1042, she and Constantine were wed. Because of the third-marriage business,

the patriarch Alexios abstained from presiding over the ceremony, leaving it to one of his lesser priests. The next day, however, he crowned the new emperor Constantine IX Monomachos.

Sending Harald out on this chore would have the added benefit, from Zoe's perspective, of making clear to her Varangian just where he stood in the new pecking order. If Harald ever had any aspirations to the imperial throne, being sent as an errand boy to fetch his new master's strumpet – actually, not even that, but merely serving as guard for the errand boy and strumpet – should have put an end to them.

But then, it seems, something happened that nobody expected, when Harald met Maria.

Seems, because unfortunately the ancient chronicles again differ in the details. At this point in their story, the *Fagrskinna* and the *Heimskringla* have Harald freshly returned from Jerusalem. According to the *Morkinskinna*, he's freshly back from Sicily. And, as noted, the skalds do not even agree who was emperor at this time, Michael V or Constantine IX. (According to them Harald blinded Constantine, which he did, but it was the *nobelissimos* Constantine, not the emperor Constantine.) Some historians have Harald departing Constantinople altogether for Kiev after the blinding, others take the sagas at their word, and the rest attempt to shoehorn the old accounts into known events.

Trying to puzzle out what this Maria's role was in Harald's story, or even exactly who she was, is difficult enough that many historians simply discount Maria Skleraina altogether. Hers was a common Byzantine female name, and there is no shortage of Marias in court circles at this time. There was Maria the sister of Michael IV and John the *Orphanotrophos*, mother of Michael V. There was Maria the widow of Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Vladislav, who had surrendered to Basil II the Bulgar Slayer in 1018 and been brought to Constantinople and made lady-in-waiting at the court, though in 1029 she had been implicated in a plot against Romanos III and exiled to the Thracesian Theme. There was (probably) Ivan's granddaughter Maria of Bulgaria, who would be the mother of Empress Irene Doukaina, and Maria Komnene the sister of future Emperor Alexios I, though if so they were still children. There was even Constantine's daughter Maria Monomacha, but she was only

twelve.

The *Fagrskinna* claims this Maria was Zoe's granddaughter, but Zoe had no children, much less grandchildren. If we trust the skalds with a kernel of truth, though, Snorri gave us a clue when he wrote, "There was a young, beautiful girl named Maria, a daughter of the empress Zoe's brother." This is so obviously in error – Zoe having no brothers, either – that some translators amend it to, "Empress Zoe had a beautiful young niece named Maria." As neither of her sisters is known to have married, let alone have daughters, most of Harald's biographers regard it as impossible that Zoe had a niece, particularly one named Maria.

The fact is, however, that Maria Skleraina was Zoe's niece, by her marriage to Constantine, because she was Constantine's niece by marriage, to his late, second wife. (Who, incidentally, was also Zoe's niece, by her marriage to Romanos III. Byzantine family trees were almost as knotty as the brother-sister marriages of Egyptian pharaohs.) If we accept, as did the skalds, this Maria as being Zoe's niece, then the only candidate is Maria Skleraina.

She had a good fifteen or twenty years on Harald, who now displayed a predilection for older women – or at least, women old enough to have achieved a certain amount of power – and possibly saw in Maria a younger version of Zoe. "In looks Skleraina was nothing special," admitted Psellos, who was about Harald's age and may have been slightly in love with her himself. "But by her character and wit she could melt a heart of stone, and intellectually she was able to discuss any subject that arose. Her voice was musical, expressed delicately with the rhythmic precision of a scholar. In conversation she had a natural lilt, an indescribable style of telling a story. She certainly bewitched me."

It is a turn of phrase, of course, not a literal accusation – the Eastern Church never took witchcraft as seriously as the Western, which in any case did not really undertake witch hunts and persecutions until after the Great Schism of 1054, and would not do their worst for another 600 years. But clearly Maria Skleraina had a certain power over men, to which Harald was not immune. And after years of exile with a disgraced middle-aged bureaucrat, she evidently found the attentions of this young, handsome, powerful champion more than flattering.

"This was the state of affairs," concluded Psellos, "when she arrived at the Queen of Cities."

XVI

Lover

It is dangerous to quarrel with women,
but more dangerous to make friends with them;
you will be harmed by both.

Kekaumenos

"At first it was thought best that Maria should take up residence in a modest home," wrote Psellos, "with bodyguards of no particular merit."

Constantine set her up in a home near the Kynegion, a Roman-era amphitheater on the eastern slope of the First Hill, the highest point of the city. Wedged at the foot of the acropolis and above the churches and mansions of the Mangana (Armory) district, this secluded neighborhood offered a grand view out over the sea wall to the glittering Bosporus, not to mention convenient access from the palace complex to the south. Here Maria's bodyguards were probably not necessary for protection, but served more as keepers. From Psellos's description the detachment did not include Harald, who as *spatharokandidatos* was certainly of distinction in the city, and whose duties at any rate revolved around the emperor, not his mistress. Conveniently, however, imperial business often required Constantine to visit Maria's home, as Psellos described:

> He always had some excuse for these visits – supervising construction details and so on – and several times a month he would stop in, supposedly to oversee the progress, but actually to meet his mistress. He was usually accompanied by a number of Zoe's men, and lest they take too much interest in his business, he would see to it that a table was stacked with delicacies for them, outside the house. They were invited to partake of the feast.

“Zoe’s men” would logically include the Varangians who had served her, and in Constantine’s view probably still did. While they sat down to dine outside, he was free to consort and cavort with Maria inside, leaving Harald to eat his heart out. But a few imperial visits a month left Maria alone most of the time, and no Varangian was on duty all day. Even if Harald did not treat them to dinner, her low-rank guards would know to look the other way when he came calling.

Modern readers should not be too quick to assume this was some torrid sexual affair. It is easy to imagine Harald as the stereotypical hot-blooded Viking, irresistible to most women and taking the rest against their will, but he was no longer an uncouth barbarian from the wild and windy North. He was now a polished courtier of good breeding, noble bearing and high rank. And Maria was a highborn lady of regal standing who viewed personal devotions seriously, in a rigidly Christian court where romance might be conducted very differently than today.

The medieval Western ideal of courtly love – in which a knight secretly championed, with no expectation in return, a high-ranking lady belonging to another man – does not begin to appear in the literature of European minstrels and troubadours until half a century after Harald’s day. However, it arose from Eastern traditions with which he was probably already familiar. The earliest known troubadour, William IX, Duke of Aquitaine and Gascony and Count of Poitou, was a leader of the Crusade of 1101 which passed through Constantinople on its way to the Holy Land, and could well have brought back an inspiration for courtly love to Europe from Byzantium, or even Islam. The influential Persian scientist and philosopher Avicenna (ibn Sina), who set the standard by describing the noblest love as a desire that can’t be attained, died in 1037, right around the time Harald visited Jerusalem.

It is possible that two centuries later, when chivalric literature and tradition was reaching its height in mainland Europe, Snorri interpreted the skaldic sagas in such a light, casting Harald as Lancelot to Maria’s Guinevere regardless of their actual relationship. But courtly love goes a long way to explaining why Constantine did not suspect, or perhaps did not believe, or at least did not do anything about, any goings-on between Harald and Maria. By today’s standards such love was innocent, almost platonic, though to protect the honor of all concerned, it was always conducted in utmost secrecy. But sneaking and skulking after a woman was beneath a noble-born Norseman,

and it is proof of Harald's high regard for Maria that at some point he tried to bring their relationship out in the open.

Significantly, according to the *Morkinskinna*, "Harald asked for her hand in marriage but was not granted it," but Snorri and the *Heimskringla* – supposedly handed down from Harald himself – are more specific: "Harald asked for her hand in marriage, but the empress refused." Zoe should have been far down the list of people needed to approve such a union, but in such a complex love quadrangle as this one the protocols of the day are literally Byzantine. Typically, a widow like Maria returned to her father's house and, after a year or so of official mourning, was matched by him to a suitable second husband. Maria's father, however, never enters the story and can be presumed dead, and her relationship to Constantine was not one normally recognized in polite society. It is unclear whether Harald and Maria, as unmarried nobles, technically needed anybody's permission to marry, though of course getting Constantine's blessing would be wise. He might even have given it, as cover for his own philandering, for Roman and Byzantine emperors rarely hesitated to bed lesser men's wives. Marrying off his mistress to his foremost guardsman might even ensure Harald's future loyalty, paying dividends if the Norseman's royal heritage ever came into play in foreign treaties. As far as Zoe's blessing, though, the implication is that, whether or not Harald needed it to marry Maria, he at least asked it as a courtesy to a former lover, possibly even in seeking her help in securing the emperor's favor.

If so, his strategy went awry. It was one thing for Constantine to have brought his lover to the capital, quite another for her to steal Harald from Zoe. The empress and her Varangian evidently had some sort of falling-out, for according to the *Morkinskinna* she took it to the next level: "It was said that Queen Zoe slandered him to the emperor, claiming that he wanted to be familiar with her niece Maria."

Being "familiar," of course, is a euphemism for sexual relations, but being familiar and wanting to be familiar are two different things. For Zoe, apparently, Harald was guilty of bad intentions. "She said the emperor should punish him," reports the *Morkinskinna*, "but it was common knowledge that the empress herself wanted him."

In making Harald's relationship with Maria public, he and Zoe inadvertently played into the hands of Constantine, who now showed himself

better at gamesmanship than anyone had anticipated. He plainly prized Maria more than Harald's friendship and allegiance, but rather than confronting the Varangian, who commanded the loyalty of the imperial bodyguard perhaps more than the emperor did, and who had proven himself both willing and capable of spilling imperial blood, Constantine simply moved Maria into the palace where he could keep an eye on her. Furthermore, setting down the deal before Zoe in writing like a formal treaty, he raised Maria to a new rank: *Sebaste*, the Greek translation of the Latin Augusta. "The contract was signed and oaths sworn," wrote Psellos, somewhat astonished, "and she who had up to now been only a lover, was now conveyed to the innermost rooms of the imperial palace, no more to be called 'mistress', but officially 'My Lady' and 'Empress.'"

If Constantine thought that would be the end of it, he underestimated Harald. Giving Maria an imperial title put her protection officially into the hands of the Varangian Guard, which was like handing the henhouse keys to the fox. The *Morkinskinna* confides, "Nordbrikt and Maria continued their affair."

For her part Zoe put on a glad face for the benefit of the court. "Most amazing," continued Psellos, "was the fact that, even as onlookers were greatly distressed at the way Zoe had been tricked and set aside and disrespected, she herself showed no emotion whatsoever, smiling at everyone and professing to be quite happy with the arrangement." She turned over the government to Constantine and, along with Theodora, withdrew from public life, into the solitude of the women's quarters.

But Zoe was still a Porphyrogenita, born to the purple, and this mortal insult was very likely the final break between her and Harald. According to Scandinavian accounts, she was not so free of jealousy as Psellos imagined.

"At this time," records the *Morkinskinna*, "Empress Zoe developed a burning hatred for Nordbrikt."

In truth Constantine had bigger concerns that summer than a spat in the palace. He had already sent Constantine Chage – the former *droungarios* of the Cibyrrhaeot fleet which had destroyed the Saracen pirates in 1035, who had since risen to command of the entire imperial fleet – to put down the tax rebellion in Cyprus. Meanwhile, in Italy, Maniakes had been quickly and

completely turning things around. Despite a lack of manpower, he had landed at Taranto in April and was waging a war of terror – going so far as to bury infants alive and execute entire villages – and winning it. In June he scored a decisive victory over the Normans at Monopoli, southeast of Bari, a setback that would cost them ten years in building their Sicilian kingdom.

Rather than acclaim his victorious general, however, Constantine chose to censure him. Among the new arrivals at court was Maria's brother, Romanos Skleros, once *doux* of Antioch and the Anatolian Theme, now promoted by Constantine to *magistros* and *protostrator*, senior military commander, high up in court hierarchy. In Anatolia Skleros had been a neighbor of Maniakes, and the two had gotten along even worse than Maniakes and Harald. With the *katepano* away in Italy, Skleros complained to Constantine that Maniakes had roughed him up and even tried to murder him. Skylitzes, however, told another version: that Skleros had more than once tried to kill Maniakes, and in his absence had plundered his estates, broken into his house and taken his wife sexually, possibly even against her will.

But Constantine took his mistress's brother at his word. He appointed a new *protospatharios* (governor) of Italy, one Pardos, "a citizen of Byzantium," wrote Skylitzes, "sent to govern a foreign land for no more reason than he was familiar to the emperor." This Pardos was authorized to arrest Maniakes and send him back to the capital.

Harald and Maniakes had never been friends, but they respected each other as warriors. Few who knew him could imagine that the fiery Anatolian general, having once already experienced the discomforts of the Byzantine prison system, and aware a second visit would likely involve castration and/or blinding, would meekly submit. As one of the empire's best commanders, with a tested army, well versed in Byzantine tactics, and not hesitant to employ terror, he posed a graver threat to the throne than Constantine seemed to realize.

And that summer the Kievan trading fleets brought momentous news from the North. Prince Yaroslav's brother and co-ruler, Mstislav of Chernigov, had long since died without an heir, leaving Yaroslav to rule all of Kievan Rus. In Scandinavia, on the other hand, King Knut the Great had also long since died, and his North Sea empire with him. His sons had ruled separately, King Svein over Norway and Hardaknut[1] over Denmark and England. But at the

behest of Kalf Arnason and other Norwegian nobles, Harald's nephew, Olaf's young son Magnus, had also departed Kiev to reclaim his father's throne in Norway, on which Svein and his evil mother Queen Alfifa fled. To head off a war Magnus had struck a deal with Hardaknut that whichever of them passed away first would cede his kingdom to the other, thereby restoring Knut's old empire. That very June of 1042, while Constantine was being crowned in Byzantium, Hardaknut died, but the English earls there chose his half-brother Edward over Magnus to rule, and Hardaknut's cousin, the *jarl* Svein Ulfsson, laid claim to Denmark.

None of these three were champions of Harald's stature. A proven leader with his own army might succeed where Olaf had failed, marching and reuniting all three kingdoms into a new North Sea Empire, by force.

But why go to all that effort, when Byzantium itself might be taken?

Like Persian *shatranj*, the game of empire had to be played several moves ahead of what was happening on the board. Threatened from both east and west, and its army and navy occupied separately, far from the capital, a man at the head of an invasion force might find the Queen of Cities ripe for conquest. At the moment that man appeared to be Maniakes.

But why should it not be Harald?

NOTE

1 Some readers may be more familiar with the Anglicized spelling of his name, 'Harthacnut'. As outlined in the Introduction, we are using the transliterated Old Norse spelling for Old Norse names in the text.

XVII

Downfall

When you enlist as a soldier, play the man in battle, even if you are going to die. Remember that you enlisted, and that no one is immortal. Avoid petty warfare; for, if you are wounded, you will die, and after death you will be a disgrace.

Kekaumenos

Via fast galley, news from Tarentum in the Italian boot arrived in Constantinople a little over two weeks after the fact, and from Cyprus in a bit less than half that, so by November results of the new emperor's first military ventures reached the capital. In the east, admiral Chage had put down the revolt in Cyprus. In the west, however, the prospective governor Pardos had been less successful. Arriving in Italy in September or October, he had promptly failed in the worst way. Maniakes immediately took him prisoner and had him executed by extraordinary, even for Byzantines, method: stuffing his nose, mouth and, for good measure, ears with horse dung. Using the silver and gold Pardos had brought to purchase the army's loyalty, Maniakes bought it for himself, taking matters one fateful step further. William of Apulia recorded, "He donned the imperial purple and shod his right foot in red leather, which is the sole right of those who rule the empire."

"Maniakes set the crown on his brow," agreed Skylitzes, "took on the imperial regalia and was proclaimed emperor."

It is hard to say whether Harald would have preferred to side with Maniakes, or against him. (Varangians in the field with Maniakes chose to

fight for him, possibly to avoid being stuffed with horse turds.) Certainly Constantine, in organizing a defensive expedition, passed Harald over for command, even of the Varangian contingent in the imperial army. Harald was a *spatharokandidatos* now, leader of the palace guard. But beyond that, for the emperor to set him loose on the battlefield might be riskier than keeping him close, even as a rival for Maria's heart.

"Constantine feared that defeat of the enemy might be impetus for another revolt," reported Psellos, without naming Harald, "that his own general might turn against him, the very emperor who had put him in command, and that a second rebellion might prove even more dangerous than the first, with a large army already in motion and fresh off of victory." Instead the emperor appointed as general none other than Stephen Pergamenos, the former eunuch of Zoe's bedchamber, whose highest command experience so far was leading the delegation to fetch Constantine to the capital, and who could hardly be said to claim the respect of the soldiers.

As the army set off with Pergamenos at its head, accompanied by icons and banners and martial music, Harald stood, as was his duty, with axe in hand and gold-hilted sword on hip, on the imperial dais beside Constantine, Zoe and Maria. It must have appeared to onlookers and gossips that he had traded one empress for another, and that Constantine, an emperor with two (or even three, counting Theodora) empresses, was loved by none of them. The mutual desires and enmities, longings and hatreds, wants and spites flowing back and forth between these four can scarcely be imagined: Harald, the warrior prince who had come up through the ranks to stand beside the throne, only to find himself lap-dog to an unworthy pretender without a drop of royal blood. Constantine, the mid-level bureaucrat now commanding an empire but unable to trust his wife, his lover or his closest bodyguard. Zoe, the empress who had raised both men to high station and been tossed aside by them for a younger woman. Maria, with the least power of all and yet, cast as the prize in all this, having their fates in her hands. And looming over them all, the threat of death at rebel hands.

To make matters even more complicated, the pro-Norman Sicilian monk Amatus of Montecassino put an entirely different spin on events: "The empress sent for Maniakes, the army commander, bidding him to come to her, for he could become the emperor by taking her as his wife."

Nowhere else in any of the ancient accounts is there the slightest hint of a

romantic attachment between these two. And in fact, romance may have played no part now. Taking the story at face value, and knowing Zoe, it's not inconceivable that she, having been scorned by both her emperor and her Varangian, had sent word inviting a new strongman to come take the place of both of them, to rule the empire and her bed.

Whether she did or not, Maniakes was coming, and Harald was facing serious trouble. Besides his palace guard, the only imperial troops left in Constantinople were the city watchmen and a few ceremonial units. The Varangians amounted to a few thousand men at most. If and when Maniakes defeated Pergamenos and arrived in the capital at the head of a rebel army, Harald would be near the top of his enemies list.

In that case, he would need an army of his own.

Over winter, sending news from Constantinople to Kiev was not easy, but neither was it impossible. The frozen Dnieper might be closed to boat traffic, but it was a veritable highway for messengers staunch enough to make the journey. The cold and snow may have seemed nearly insurmountable to travelers from sunny Mediterranean climes, but Norsemen were well and long since adapted to such travails. Winter was peak season for the northern fur trade, and Scandinavians happily traversed snow and ice on skis, snowshoes and cow-bone skates, with draft horses wearing ice crampons to draw sledges full of cargo. Any number of men in Harald's company, Halldor and Ulf among them, could have made a winter trip to Kiev. And in this manner Harald could have kept Yaroslav apprised of the goings-on in Byzantium over those crucial few months.

In early 1043 Maniakes embarked his rebel army, crossed the Ionian Sea and landed in Dyrrachium, modern Albania. From there he began the trek eastward across Bulgaria, thrusting aside any and all local armies who opposed him and camping two days out from Thessaloniki on the Aegean coast.

Stephen advanced to meet him. In February the two armies came together near Ostrovo, modern Arnissa in Macedonia, where Michael IV and Harald had defeated the Bulgarians two years earlier. Maniakes, determined to avoid the same fate, did not wait for the expected day of battle, but launched a surprise attack the prior evening. The imperials were taken by surprise, or as

Psellos charitably put it, were “slow in drawing up their battle formation.”

Maniakes himself led the onslaught, laying into Stephen’s troops with his own sword, striking fear into all who came against him. With the battle-hardened veterans of his rebel army making short work of the inexperienced imperials, his new empire was almost in his grasp. In fact, Skylitzes declared the battle technically a rebel victory: “Stephen’s troops, defeated, with Maniakes himself charging through their ranks, declared him emperor.”

Yet in his moment of triumph the great general realized he had been hit in the right side. He attempted to wheel his horse back toward the rebel camp, but in doing so slumped from the saddle. His men found him lying soaked in blood, dead. The would-be emperor had been struck by a random arrow in the heart or a major vein, and torn it out, only to swiftly bleed to an inglorious death. No man ever took credit for the blow.

When everyone realized Maniakes was dead, the imperial troops retook the offensive. The rebels lost heart and threw down their arms. Stephen had their leader’s body decapitated and the head sent to the capital, where Constantine had it mounted on a spike for all to witness.

It can only be surmised what Harald felt upon beholding that sight, or upon Stephen’s triumphant entry into the city. Constantine organized a victory parade, nominally in honor of his newly anointed general, but in reality to impress upon the citizenry their new emperor’s military prowess. The infantry led the way, spears bristling, armor and shields gleaming. Behind them came the knights of the cavalry, cataphracts draped in glittering scale mail on horses likewise armored to the knees, pennants fluttering from their upraised lances. In their wake came the losers, prisoners stripped of all finery, their heads shaved, riding backwards on asses as the crowd, laughing and jeering, pelted them with garbage. Their erstwhile leader Maniakes rode at their rear, or at least his head did, held high on a lance point, accompanied by some of his richer dressings and personal belongings. Now came the general Stephen himself, the gelded former servant now richly accoutered, on a majestic steed, preceded by guards bearing the fasces and axes and, according to Psellos, accompanied by the whole of the imperial guard.

It is unclear, and unimportant, whether Harald, as head of the Varangians, took part in the procession or stood watching it from his post with the emperor and empresses from the imperial podium near the Chalke Gate of the palace. The lesson was plain. Fate could be fickle, particularly in Byzantine

service. A lackeyed eunuch of the bedchamber could become a hero of the empire, and a once illustrious general reduced to an object of hate and scorn.

What was more important at the moment, however, was that against all odds the imperial army had returned, victorious, to the city. This was probably March of 1043. It would be late April at the earliest, more likely May, before word could reach Kiev. By that time it would make little difference, for events were already in motion.

If Harald indeed was sending such information to Yaroslav, it came near exceeding mere court gossip and was tantamount to espionage, which may be what he and the Kievan Grand Prince intended all along. By this time, however, Harald had become skilled at intrigue, not least because of his ongoing affair with Maria.

"Once when they were on a balcony jutting out over the sea," the *Morkinskinna* relates, "the emperor learned of it and was advised to go and discover Nordbrikt's treachery for himself." When Maria heard him and his entourage coming, she ordered Harald, in the best tradition of philanderers, off the balcony into the water, and when Constantine arrived she denied knowing anything about him. The emperor believed her and ignored any further stories of her cuckoldry. According to the *Morkinskinna*, "The emperor thought that Harald was innocent and that his accusers had lied."

Harald must have realized his luck couldn't last. Staying on the emperor's good side would be impossible. Even the hero of the moment, Pergamenos, quickly fell afoul of Constantine's suspicions. Skylitzes recorded, "Stephen was accused of plotting against the emperor, intending to place on the throne the patrician Leo son of Lampros, the commander of Mytilene."

Perhaps Constantine's fear of a successful, and therefore rebellious, general had borne itself out, but how Pergamenos, so recently the darling of the city, could have engineered a coup in the Aegean while fighting Maniakes is unexplained, and highly improbable. And that Leo was commander of the island where Constantine had suffered his exile seems more than coincidental. More likely, the emperor took the opportunity to relieve himself of two potential adversaries in one stroke. Stephen's property was confiscated, he was tonsured as a monk and exiled. Leo, whatever his sins, was tortured, blinded and made a spectacle before the mob before he died.

“Power and status derived from imperial favor,” observed Attaleiates, “is not very reliable.”

If this was the reward for service to the empire, it was time to look elsewhere for employment. Surely only the brute power of the Varangians still held Harald clear, but even that could only last until the Byzantines schemed around it. According to Snorri, with the excuse that his nephew Magnus had need of him at home in Scandinavia, “Harald resigned his command.”

What should have relieved Constantine and Zoe of animosity toward him instead inflamed it. “When Empress Zoe heard this she was infuriated,” Snorri recorded, “and laid charges against him, accusing him of having cheated the emperor of plunder won on campaign under Harald’s command.”

This charge of embezzlement, dating back to the Sicilian campaign, reeks of Maniakes striking at his old rival from beyond the grave. Such accusations had been forgotten while Harald was Zoe’s favorite, but now went to the top of the list. According to the *Morkinskinna*, “They said that while he commanded the Byzantine army the galleys in his command had contributed almost no gold.”

Harald had never assumed overall command of the Byzantine army. If he had, the wars in Sicily and Italy might have gone much differently. As has been noted, the fighting was mostly on land and Harald’s ships indeed did not contribute much to the war effort, either tactically or monetarily. (Skylitzes, however, made a point of mentioning that during the recent uprising against Michael V the palace looters, rather conveniently for any embezzlers among them, burned the imperial tax records.) It makes little difference. Mere pilferage was a minor concern, at least to Zoe.

“The second charge leveled on him,” relates the *Morkinskinna*, “was the Empress Zoe accusing Nordbrikt of being familiar with the maiden Maria.”

This was an escalation of her earlier charge, that Harald had merely *wanted* to be familiar with Maria. Whether or not the two had actually taken their relationship to that level remains unproven, but at the time was accepted as fact. Even a half-century afterward, the English historian William of Malmesbury had it that Harald was jailed for debauching a noblewoman. Now that Zoe had made a formal accusation, Constantine could no longer ignore it, and the crime was certainly sufficient to see Harald imprisoned. “The slander was so effective,” recounts the *Morkinskinna*, “that Empress

Zoe and Emperor Monomachos had Nordbrikt seized and bound and taken to a dungeon."

Imagine again the twisted tangle of love and hate connecting these four, as Harald's own men took him into custody (for, again, it was the Varangian Guard who dealt punishment to Varangian guardsmen, no matter their rank): Zoe, taking grim final satisfaction in the destruction of the lover who had spurned her. Constantine, glad to be finally rid of his troublesome bodyguard, relieved to have Zoe off his back, and perhaps concerned how Maria would react to Harald's arrest. And for her part Maria, the *Sebaste*, possibly facing imperial wrath herself and realizing how little power her title actually held as her champion was dragged from the palace.

"As Harald was brought to the prison," recounted Snorri of a passage from the *Morkinskinna*, "his dead brother, St. Olaf, appeared to him as though in a dream, promising to help him." It is not surprising that in this dark moment – the darkest since his furtive escape from Stiklestad – Harald thought of his brother Olaf, who had risen so high, only to meet a senseless death. Had fate decreed that Harald, having come so far, would suffer an even more unworthy end? An emperor willing to turn on his own generals, as Constantine had on Maniakes and Pergamenos – and an empress seeking to assuage a broken heart with blood – would have no compunctions about meting out even more terrible punishment to a foreign barbarian who had dared to trifle with an empress. Or two.

Yet Harald almost certainly knew matters were not yet settled. It is likely there was something more to this arrest, of which the skalds were unaware. A century and a half afterward, Saxo Grammaticus asserted that Harald was charged with murder. Skylitzes confirmed that about this time there occurred a street scuffle near the Church of St. Mammes in the city's Rus quarter, between Scyths (in this case referring to Kievans) and Greeks, who to this point "had no troubles between them and conducted their business in peace. But now a dispute arose among some Scyth merchants in the city, things got out of hand and a wealthy and powerful Scyth was killed."

Admittedly, the two matters may be unrelated, merely coincidental. What reason, if any, Harald would have to kill a Kievan merchant is unknown. Perhaps the victim was a Byzantine agent. Perhaps Harald was not involved at all. Yet the murder of a Rus on the streets of Constantinople plays into yet another theory of why Harald ran afoul of Constantine Monomachos in the

summer of 1043, a theory bolstered by the sagas' assertion that not only Harald was arrested, but his lieutenants Ulf and Halldor along with him. As charges of bedding Maria could hardly accrue to them, it is probable the two Icelanders were implicated with their prince in his other alleged crimes – embezzlement, or murder.

Or espionage.

In view of events that summer, Harald's wish to resign his commission and return north is surely more than coincidence, and his explanation is cause for suspicion. Before his departure and ultimate death, Harald's deadly rival the *strategos* Maniakes had presciently warned the court that "it would not be long before Nordbrikt laid siege to Byzantium if his ambition and arrogance went unchecked."

And Skylitzes named the murder of the Rus merchant in the city streets as the direct cause of the most pivotal incident of that decade: the attack on Constantinople by the Rus.

XVIII

War

Yaroslav sent his son Vladimir to attack Greece,
and entrusted him with a large force.

Nestor the Chronicler

Historians have questioned why the Kievans, so long such firm allies of Byzantium that they provided the empire with troops, suddenly chose the summer of 1043 to attack. That their invasion came at almost the same time as Maniakes' rebellion, the claim goes, can't be mere coincidence. Following from that, some connection must be posited to exist. And the only thing Maniakes and Prince Yaroslav of Kiev had in common was Harald of the Varangian Guard.

The late Polish historian Professor Andrzej Poppe of the Institute of History University, Warsaw, theorized that Harald went so far as to act as a liaison between Maniakes and Yaroslav, to coordinate a combined attack. The claim is not widely accepted, but it is not necessary for Harald to have been in actual contact with the rebel general. He had constant news of Maniakes' approach, and had only to send the information north. Yaroslav, the first overall leader of the Rus in a generation, could take it from there. Whether his offensive was timed to coincide with Maniakes' anticipated invasion in the west, either as a two-pronged assault or as a preemptive strike to capture the undefended city while the imperial army was away dealing with the rebels on the frontiers, the rebel defeat and the *strategos*' sudden death upset the Kievans' timetable and possibly their strategy.

Every spring a Rus fleet journeyed down the Dnieper, across the Black Sea, to thread the narrow Bosporus with a year's worth of trade goods. But in July 1043 the summer sun dawned over a massive armada, not of merchantmen, but of warships drawn up beneath the city walls, their decks crowded with armored soldiers. Skylitzes, almost certainly exaggerating, estimated them at some hundred thousand men, but Attaleiates, who likely bore witness himself from the walls of the city, numbered the fleet at 400 ships: "Their crews were well armed, veteran fighters, and innumerable."

Grand Prince Yaroslav had not come in person but sent the fleet under the leadership of his eldest son, twenty-three-year-old Vladimir of Novgorod, assisted by the Novgorodian *voivode* (general) Vyshata. Even with such numbers, assaulting the imperial city appears to have been an intimidating prospect. Instead of immediately attacking, the Kievan fleet dropped anchor in the Bosporus and occupied the Propontis (Sea of Marmara), effectively cutting off the city from both the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

Constantine sent emissaries across the water, promising reparations for whatever imagined offense had brought the Kievans to the brink of conflict. The invaders demanded a thousand staters (coins) per ship, an amount so impossible to fulfill that it could not be taken seriously. They expected the city to simply surrender. Instead the Byzantines prepared for war.

While all this was going on, where was Harald, and Ulf and Halldor?

As mentioned before, some historians assert that Harald had already taken his leave of Constantinople as early as the summer of 1042, a year before the invasion; others, not until the summer of 1044, a year afterward. Either way, we must account for his actions and whereabouts during this pivotal event. At no point do Scandinavian sources make any mention of the Kievan invasion, let alone that Harald had anything to do with it, so we must assume that he took no part. If we further assume that he had by that time returned to Kiev, it only begs the question – why did he not turn around and join the invasion? It is difficult to imagine that Grand Prince Yaroslav, planning a massive assault on the world's most impregnable city, would not enlist his newly returned expert on all things Byzantine, but simply hand over Harald's accumulated treasure and bid him happily on to Norway. It is equally difficult to believe Harald would not take the opportunity to enlarge his personal fortune even further by a thorough looting of the capital of the Western world, or simply to extract some measure of vengeance against Zoe and Constantine.

But if Harald was still in Constantinople in the summer of 1043, as some historians do contend, there is another, simple, very good reason why he took no part in the invasion: He could not, because he was in prison.

The most infamous prison in Byzantium was the Noumera, raised on the site of the old Baths of Zeuxhippus after they burned down in the Nika riots of the year 532. A series of chambers built into the walls of the palace itself, it originally served as a barracks for the *Noumeroi*, an early imperial guard regiment. It must be said that none of the sagas specifically place Harald, Ulf and Halldor in the Noumera, which – despite its ill fame among Byzantines – Scandinavian skalds did not know by name, but there was no more likely place for their incarceration. According to the *Flateyjarbok*, their cell (which would thereafter be known to Varangians as Harald's Tower) was on the same street as the Varangian Church of St. Olaf, near the Hagia Sophia. As the Noumera was only across the *Augustaion*, the Great Square, from the Hagia, this makes it even more likely to be the place of their imprisonment.

Michael Glykas, an accomplished Byzantine historian, theologian, scientist and poet who lived a little more than a hundred years after Harald, was accused of plotting against the then-emperor Manuel I Komnenos and thrown into the Noumera, where he remained for five years. If he was not locked in the very cell that held Harald and his men, he knew of it well enough. "I call the Noumera Hades, and worse than Hades, for in its frightfulness it surpasses Hades itself," he wrote. "In this gloomy, deepest dungeon, there is no light, nor any talk, for the constant smoke, and the impenetrable darkness make it impossible to see or recognize one another."

In Glykas' time Varangians served in the Noumera as jailers – "Bonds and tortures, guards and towers," he would remember, "and the shouting Varangians and sheer terror keep you awake" – but in 1043, with Kievans outside the walls, the Scandinavians in the city were all suspect. According to Skylitzes, Constantine "posted a guard over them to keep them from rising up in the city if given the chance and opportunity."

"The prison was a high open-topped tower, with the cell door at street level," recounted Snorri. "Harald was shoved through this door, together with Halldor Snorrason and Ulf Ospaksson."

The Varangians' new quarters were somewhat more austere than the Guard

barracks. “The cells were like vertical caves,” relates the *Morkinskinna*, “this one round and dug out to one side to form a kind of den.” There was a stream or spring running across the floor, though the water was probably tainted, since it ran through the rotting bodies of previous occupants. The only place to sit was on corpses.

“This is not much of a home,” remarked scar-faced Halldor with his typical stoicism, “but it may get worse.”

The Norsemen could do little but ponder which ultimate fate they preferred, blinding or castration, and pray to St. Olaf that they would not suffer both. They might even simply be left to starve, until they were forced to eat the dead or even turned on each other.

It became apparent, however, that they would not live that long, for the Varangians were not alone in their cell. There was something down there with them….

“There was a huge venomous serpent that slept by the stream trickling through the cell,” reveals the *Morkinskinna*. “The serpent fed on the corpses of men who crossed the emperor or his lords and were subsequently thrown down there.”

With peace denied, and the bulk of the imperial navy still out to sea, Constantine pressed into service whatever random ships happened to be in the city harbors: some worn-out hulks, old transports and a few *dromones*, crewed with garrisons of the nearby provinces who had been hurriedly called to the capital. The emperor spent the night aboard ship, accompanied by his military commanders, and in the morning ordered the fleet, such as it was, to deploy in fighting formation.

According to Attaleiates, the battle of the Bosporus took place on a Sunday. (Historians believe it was July 17, 1043.) That morning, as the imperial ships rowed out from harbor on the European side, the Kievans put out from the Asiatic bank and arranged themselves in battle line across the channel, blocking it.

“The sight had a terrifying effect on every man who saw it,” recalled Psellos. “As for me, I was standing beside the emperor. He was seated on the hill which sloped gradually down toward the sea, observing the encounter from a distance.”

In accordance with the naval tactics of the age, however, neither fleet wished to break formation in making the first move, and so they stood facing off for the better part of the day. In case the invaders had reconsidered, a fresh peace delegation even made its way from the imperial fleet, only to be told the Kievans had raised their demands to three pounds of gold per soldier.

Constantine ran out of patience. Toward evening he ordered two or three ships forward to provoke the invaders into action. A few Kievan galleys duly rowed out to meet the imperials, dividing and sweeping around to trap them against their line. The Byzantine commander, the *magistros* Basil Theodorakanos, had fought in Sicily alongside Maniakes and Harald. He played right into the invaders' hands, not stopping to skirmish but launching his ships straight at the enemy formation. It should have been a slaughter, and so it was, but not as the Rus expected. Had Harald been there, he could have warned them the imperial ships came equipped with one weapon the Kievan galleys did not: Greek fire.

According to Skylitzes, Theodorakanos "sailed right in between them, burned seven ships with Greek fire and sank three more, their crews with them. He captured one vessel by boarding it personally, killing some of the crew and chasing off others who were astonished at his daring." Greek fire had not been used against the Rus since their last invasion of Constantinople in 941, over a century earlier. Probably many of the Kievans had heard old tales of the weapon, without believing them. The effect was as much psychological as physical. They had no idea how to extinguish the flames. For many the only escape was overboard, to risk death by drowning.

Now the rest of the imperial fleet moved out. At the sight the Kievans lost their nerve. Skylitzes wrote, "They asked themselves, not surprisingly, if they had taken such losses against just a few enemy ships, what would they lose if they had to battle the entire fleet?"

As the invaders sought to extricate themselves from the confines of the Bosporus their very numbers worked against them. Prows and sterns banged off each other. Oars tangled and snapped. To top it off, amid the confusion a summer storm kicked up and bore down on the channel.[1] High waves soon swamped many of the Kievan *monoxylai*. More were driven onto the rocky shoals and shores. Vladimir himself went into the water until rescued by a nearby ship. By the time the Kievans withdrew onto the expanse of the Black

Sea, Skylitzes claimed, no fewer than 15,000 corpses littered the banks of the strait, and Psellos remembered, “So a great slaughter of outlanders took place that a virtual stream of blood clouded the sea. One might well believe it poured down the rivers from the mainland.”

In the depths of the dungeon in which they were imprisoned, Harald and Halldor and Ulf had been fighting their own battle. That their cell was home to a large snake which, as the chronicles declare, fed on prisoners, is certainly fanciful. Snakes, whether constrictor or venomous, swallow their prey whole and would leave no bodies. Yet that there was just such a serpent present could have some basis in fact. Africa, just across the Mediterranean from Constantinople, is home to any number of large constrictors and vipers, which could well have been imported. And prehistoric Greece was once home to the largest viper ever known, *Laophis crotaloides*, the “people’s snake,” which grew to thirteen feet and weighed sixty pounds. Its modern-day descendant, the Balkan rock viper native to Greece and the Aegean, still grows to over four feet and could have been larger in ancient times. One might certainly have made its way into the dungeon in pursuit of vermin feeding on human remains.

There followed a desperate, classic men-vs-serpent battle right out of a Hollywood fantasy spectacle – coiling, thrashing, a convenient stick to hold open its mouth and prevent its bite, a sheepskin around Harald’s arm to soak up the venom, a final knife to the heart, the whole bit. A thousand years ago it was not yet a cliché. The story appears in the *Morkinskinna*, and Saxo Grammaticus gave it credence, but it must be noted that Snorri, writing two centuries later, ignored it completely.

With the Kievan fleet in disarray, Emperor Constantine felt the time was right for him to take command personally. According to Skylitzes he remained at sea two days, directing the *magister* Basil Theodorokanos to clear the coastline of enemy troops and to ensure that the Kievan fleet returned north.

Nestor the Chronicler recorded that 6,000 Kievans had been left ashore under their general Vyshata. By this point they had abandoned any plans to take Constantinople and wished only to begin the long march home. Admiral

Basil's infantry, however, now richly equipped with the booty reaped from the thousands of dead invaders lying along the shore, soon set upon them and rounded up the survivors. The Kievans would enter the Great City after all, just not as they had intended.

Meanwhile, according to the *Morkinskinna*, Harald, Ulf and Halldor spent a night and a day in their dungeon, presumably living on raw snake and the vile water running across the corpse-tainted floor.

They had nothing but time. Time for reflection, time to ponder the fate that had seen them rise almost to the very pinnacle of Christendom, and now fall to its very depths. Ulf and Halldor, in particular, might have been asking themselves if they had chosen to follow the wisest of chieftains. It was Harald's propensity for taking risks in both love and war that had seen them all to their current predicament. As for Harald, he might have thought back to those fugitive days in his escape from Norway, wondering if he was ever destined for fame. Surely he had attained a great measure of it, but at what cost? Would his sainted brother Olaf have approved of the things Harald had done in his rise to power?

As if in answer, on the second night there came a voice at the door, a female voice, asking if the Varangians were still alive. Told that they were, she asked if they wanted to be rescued. The skalds reported – not without a certain amount of dry humor – that they were "not opposed to the idea."

The woman had brought two servants with her. She ordered them up to the open top of the cell to lower a rope to the prisoners.

"I came," she told them, "because King Olaf wants to save you."

NOTE

1 The *lodos*, the strong south-westerly wind which frequently blows up out of the Aegean and the Sea of Marmara, can descend out of clear afternoon skies to kick up sudden white water and violent westerly squalls on the Bosporus.

XIX

Escape from Byzantium

Neither the widow nor the young maiden can accuse me
Of being late into the stronghold that morning
Where we made a swinging of swords.
I cleared a path with my spear-point
And left marks of my deeds there.

Harald Sigurdsson

"Ulf and Halldor were pulled up first," according to the *Morkinskinna*, "then Harald last."

That there were no guards to intercede while this anonymous woman sent two servants up the outside of the prison tower with a rope could be put down to the short-handed empire drafting all available troops for the defeat of the Kievan invaders. Then again, it appears the Varangians' rescuer was not without means to bribe any guards to seek duty elsewhere. Snorri called her nothing more than a "distinguished lady." The *Morkinskinna* states that she was a widow, which could apply to either Zoe or Maria, not to mention a large segment of the city's female population in those violent days. However, the fact that the skalds, who recognize both the Augusta and *Sebaste* by name, do not recognize the Varangians' rescuer, indicates she was at most a lady of the court, conceivably even a handmaiden sent by one of the empresses (assuming Zoe had some last-minute change of heart). For her part, this highborn lady did not claim to have been sent by either empress, but rather on behalf of Harald's dead brother.

“King Olaf came to me,” she told the Varangians. “He told me where you were. You have the advantage of his protection, and always will.”

None of this would have been unbelievable to Harald, as a man of his time, particularly in light of all the miracles attributed to Olaf after his martyrdom. (Two hundred years later, however, Snorri included the woman in his retelling, but not her story.) “Nothing could be better and more apt than my brother releasing me,” he said. “What words did you have with him?”

“He came to me in my sleep and told me that I would be cured of an illness I suffered, if I went on a mission for him. I asked him who he was and where I was supposed to go to perform this rescue. He said that he did not wish his brother to suffer here in the south, even though he did not always agree with your plans. After that I awoke and saw that I was healed. Then I came here.”

There was little time to thank her. The three escapees bid their rescuers farewell, and made their way across the nighted palace grounds to the Varangian barracks, where Constantine’s guards, if any, were run off or dispatched so easily that they don’t even enter into the story.

“The Varangians welcomed them with relief,” says the *Morkinskinna*, “and Harald said it was time to take up their weapons.” At the emperor’s bidding the Guard may have carried out Harald’s arrest, but obviously not all were convinced of his guilt, and at least some were ready to follow him again.

Now comes the last bit of confusion between the Scandinavian and Byzantine accounts. As mentioned before, the skalds have Harald and his men break into the emperor’s quarters and blind him, plainly referring to Michael V despite the fact that Snorri, writing later, clearly referred to “Constantine Monomachos, who ruled the empire jointly with Empress Zoe.” That Constantine and Harald never actually ran into each other during the Varangian commander’s escape indicates the emperor was probably not in the palace – explainable by the fact that he was not even in the city, but aboard a ship directing mop-up operations against the Kievans.

“That same night,” continues the *Morkinskinna*, “Harald seized the palace where the maiden Maria resided, and they spirited her away with them.” The Varangians, however, had no need to take control of the entire Great Palace. Harald and his men, racing down the marbled corridors with swords and spears and axes in hand, had only to reach the imperial quarters, and could count themselves lucky to make it that far. With most of the garrison away manning the imperial ships or herding Kievan prisoners along the shores of

the Bosporus, it would have been short work for the axe-wielding Varangians to kill or simply scare off any servants, eunuchs or leftover sentries who got in the way.

As Maria resided only across the empty emperor's chamber from Zoe's, it is tempting to think Harald took the opportunity to kick down his ex-lover's door and share a few harsh words with her before leaving forever. Zoe was doubtless not only in the palace that night, but behind that door, and if she knew what was good for her, she had it securely bolted.

Time, however, was of the essence. So it was Maria's chamber that Harald burst into. The *Sebaste*, roused from her bed by armed men and given little time to dress, let alone to prepare or even think things through, had no choice but to do and go as Harald willed. And the moment she followed her Varangian was the moment she betrayed her emperor.

From the Great Palace it was about a half-mile run north through nighted streets, downhill through the deserted warehouse district along the water's edge, where the Varangians moored their ships. For centuries the Prosphorion Harbor, nearest the mouth of the Golden Horn, had been the most convenient off-loading point for inbound shipping. But, lying so close to the main channel of the Bosporus, it was subject to silting, and by Harald's time it had been reduced to a mere dockyard in front of the Gate of Eugenios, the Royal Gate. The Varangians' main concern had to be that it lay directly next to the Neorion Harbor, the anchorage of the imperial fleet. Yet by all accounts Harald and his men faced no interference from there, which backs up the theory that they made their escape while the fleet was away. Likewise, the fact that their own galleys were available gives credence to both the idea that Constantine had not trusted the Varangians to join the action at sea, particularly against the Kievans, and that he did not even have the manpower to confiscate their vessels and crew them with Byzantines.

There were just two galleys – whether longships, *monoxylai* or *dromones* – available this night, or perhaps Harald had only enough men with him to crew a pair. If the Gate of Eugenios was closed, the Varangians saw it opened. However, the gate may well have already been open, for at night the Golden Horn itself was closed by the great barrier chain across its mouth.

Today the Istanbul Archeological Museum displays a length of this chain, leftover from 1453 when the city fell to Sultan Mehmed II, the Conqueror. The barrier, however, dates to seven centuries before that, when Emperor Leo

III stood off the second Arab siege of Constantinople (AD 717–718). Leo's chain probably consisted of wooden sections, nailed or shackled together, but by Harald's time the chain was made of cast or wrought iron links, each about two feet long, with lengths of seven links hooked at each end to floats made of rafts or barrels or simply huge logs. Every night it was drawn across the Horn by ship or capstan, from the Kentenarion Tower on the city side to the Castle of Galatea on the north shore. The chain was designed specifically to stop ships from entering or exiting the Horn. And Harald's galleys were on the wrong side of it.

The barrier chain's point of greatest slack, and so least resistance, was in the center of the channel, only about 500 yards or so from the Phosphorion. A sailing ship might not accelerate to sufficient pace in such a short distance, but a rowed galley could work up to maximum speed in not much more than its own length. And Harald was going to need maximum speed.

He ordered, "The crews of both ships should man the oars, but everyone who is not rowing should take a sleeping roll or other weight in his arms and crowd into the stern of the ships. We will see if they can run up onto the chains."

It was an old trick, dating back at least some 1,200 years to the First Punic War, when Romans used it to escape the harbor of Syracuse in Sicily, which may well be where Harald heard of it. (Though for Roman galleys to raise their underwater bow rams up over a floating chain must have required them to practically rear up in the water.) In a relatively short wooden boat, it would not be that difficult to raise the bow enough that it would ride up over a barrier chain. The main thing was to carry enough speed that the galley did not get hung up, for ships, particularly wooden ships, are never meant to put all their weight on mid-keel.

The Varangians passed out onto the Horn with Harald's ship in the lead. They headed straight into the passage, parallel to the chain, for to hit it at an angle would only add to the difficulty. Toward mid-channel the helmsmen leaned on their steering oars, the rowers stroked against each other, and the boats came about hard to starboard. Now the oarsmen put their backs into it and the galleys leaped ahead, running straight for the chain. Everyone not manning an oar grabbed whatever they could carry and ran aft.

The boats' sterns sank under the weight. Their prows rose high in the water. As Harald's ship came upon the barrier it is not hard to imagine poor Maria,

so recently asleep in the safest bed in the empire, now seeking the only safety to be found, in the crook of Harald's arm, as they and everyone else braced for impact….

On striking the chain the ship's bow pitched upward, tossing the unwary to the deck, or overboard. With a squeal of wet wood on metal and the groan of planks twisting in ways they had never been intended to twist, the boat slithered up onto the chain. Harald and his men bawled at the rowers to keep at it, despite the fact that half of them were stroking air as the boat slanted ever more steeply upward and ground nearly to a stop, halfway over the barrier.

Harald called, "Now, everyone run forward to the bow, holding onto your weights."

This was the danger point, with the ship's entire weight bearing down on that fulcrum where the chain ran under the keel, the whole boat bending under the strain, the mast torqued in its bracings as the ropes and stays stretched to the breaking point. For an agonizing moment the entire galley see-sawed over the barrier. Then, as everyone's weight gathered forward, it pitched down, the prow splashed into the water and the stern rose clear. The forward rowers dug in with their oars and the galley slid down off the chain into the Bosporus, free.

Any cheering and celebrations were short-lived, for only half the escapees had made it. As Harald's boat rowed clear, everyone ran back to the stern again to see the second galley ride up onto the barrier, prow rising high from the water, oars waving, wood creaking, only to come to a complete stop. Those aboard ran for the bow. The ship bent under their weight… until a massive *crack* echoed across the water.

"The other galley, hung up on the chain," the *Morkinskinna* records, "broke in two."

Now the Varangians learned why enemy fleets had never dared to use the same trick to defeat the barrier chain of Constantinople. It only worked half the time.

Back broken, oars flailing, guy lines snapping and planks pulling apart under the strain, the second galley lay like a dying beast, prostrate over the barrier. The two ends of its hull fell apart, dumping men overboard. Any wearing armor never came up again.

Harald ordered his ship hard about, circling back to the wreck. Swimming

men were pulled from the water. Tossed lines brought the two ships together, and the survivors of the stricken vessel clambered aboard Harald's. "A number of men drowned in the strait," the *Morkinskinna* admits, "though some were saved."

By this time an alarm had surely been raised in the city. The Golden Horn was narrow enough that ballistas firing from the walls on either side could send bolts into mid-channel. As daylight came up over the Asian shore of the Bosporus, Harald's men cast off and, riding low in the water, their ship sailed into the light and turned to port, bound for home.

The *Morkinskinna* lauds, "Thus Harald escaped Constantinople, out onto the Black Sea."

Maria, being no sailor, could do nothing but watch the Great City recede in the ship's wake, and her future as *Sebaste* with it. She had waited all those years in exile at Constantine's side for a chance to return to the capital. In betraying her emperor, she would not only lose him but give up that life of plenty for an unknown future in the barbarian North, never to return again.

Beside her in the stern Harald looked his last upon the towers of Miklagard, as he had first seen them from the bow nine years earlier. If he ever saw them again, it would be as a prisoner once more. For the Byzantine navy still lay between him and home.

The imperial fleet, such as it was – Skylitzes says it was down to just twenty-four ships, and according to Nestor only fourteen – had cruised out onto the Black Sea in search of the surviving Kievans, but either the weather or nightfall hindered their efforts. The Rus had taken shelter in an inlet, and the Byzantines sailed right past them. Realizing how few their pursuers were, the Rus regained their courage and set out after them. Their crews were rested, while the Byzantines had been rowing all night. The imperials were quickly surrounded and trapped against the shore. In the ensuing battle four Byzantine ships were taken and their crews slaughtered. More ran aground, and the few crewmen who were not killed or enslaved escaped to land.

The Kievans, though, had lost their taste for conquest. They no longer had enough ships for all their men. Six thousand left ashore were more inclined to march for Kiev than Constantinople. However, the western bank of the Black Sea was now the domain of Katakalon Kekaumenos, Harald's former

compatriot in Sicily, who had been rewarded with high rank despite (or posted to the frontier because of) having fought for Michael V the previous year. He had taken note of the Kievan armada's passage on its way toward the capital, but had done nothing, for the two empires were then not yet at war. On its return, however, he was ready. At Varna, on the Bulgarian coast, his army fell on the Kievan land force, taking 800 prisoners, including the *voivode* Vyshata. He would spend three years as a prisoner in Constantinople, and was lucky at that. Most of the captives were blinded, or had their right hands cut off.

Amid all this upheaval, no one took note of a lone galley, heavy-laden and sluggish in the water, emerging from the Bosporus, headed north.

On a deck overcrowded with brawny, vulgar Varangians, there could be little privacy, even for a lady so recently of the imperial court. Little chance for Maria and Harald to share a private moment – one that, knowing each other's hearts, they must both have secretly dreaded.

As the ship steered off the wide expanse of the Black Sea into the narrowing mouth of the Dnieper, bound for Kiev, Maria must have felt her world closing in on her. It was one thing to thrill to a forbidden love with a dashing champion in the comforts of the palace, but another thing completely to become the wife of a northern barbarian.

She was of the sunny Aegean, not the frigid North. She had risen from self-imposed exile to become empress of Christendom's mightiest realm. Harald had the blood of kings, yet he was without a kingdom. For Maria, that was no longer enough. Whatever her feelings for Harald, she still loved Constantine, if he would have her back. She was brave enough to anger both of them, and sure enough of them both to risk it.

And Harald? He was right back where he'd started, departing Kiev all those years before, when Yaroslav had decreed Elisaveta too good for him. No matter how rich and powerful he became, his desires were always just that little bit beyond his reach.

No matter. He had never been afraid to take what he wanted, by force.

But not this time.

"Before he set off," the *Morkinskinna* confides, "he put the maiden Maria ashore and made sure she had a good escort back to Constantinople."

She could always tell Constantine she'd been kidnapped. But Harald had a message of his own for Maria to take back to the city. "He told her to tell Empress Zoe that she had left with Harald, then ask her how great the empress's power was over him and who had gotten the better of the other."

Whether or not Maria ever delivered the missive to the empress – and she would have been wise not to – it goes all the way back to that first meeting of Zoe with Harald, in the garden of the Great Palace, when she asked for a lock of his hair and he came back asking for one of hers. All those years, their relationship had been a power struggle, and now, in the end, all that mattered was who finally won.

The *Morkinskinna* says of Harald, "He said that it was plain to see that the empress could not have stopped him from taking the maiden away any time he wished."

Harald had made his point. He sent Maria safely on her way home and, as shall be seen, not without some regret. He had won his contest with Zoe, but in the winning he had lost something more.

Harald is not only famous as a warrior. Of all the Viking rulers, he is the one most renowned as a poet, possibly because his life experience was so much wider-ranging than that of most Norse kings. Of his most famous writings, only fragments survive – six of sixteen verses. All were supposedly penned during his voyage north from Constantinople, by which time he had been rejected by two empresses and one Rus princess. One of the stanzas lists his achievements:

> I have eight accomplishments:
> I forge Yggr's wine[1];
> I am skilled at riding on horseback;
> I have sometimes practiced swimming;
> I can glide on skis;
> I shoot and row well enough;
> I understand both harp-playing and poems.

Yet, when taken in context, Harald seems to be feeling somewhat sorry for himself, and wondering why all that is not enough, for all the other verses

end with the common refrain:

Yet the gold-ringed woman in Russia scorns me.

NOTE

1 Odin’s poetry.

PART THREE

Halt ye not not for food or slumber,
View not vantage, count not number;
Jolly reapers forward still,
Grow the crop on vale or hill,
Thick or scattered, stiff or lithe,
It shall down before the scythe.
Forward with your sickles bright,
Reap the harvest of the fight.
Onward footmen, onward horsemen,
To the charge, ye gallant Norsemen!

Sir Walter Scott

XX

Prince of the Rus

Harald returned home from Miklagard through Rus
on a merchant ship, well provided with treasure and goods.

Agrip af Noregskonungasogum
(*History of Norwegian Kings*)

For all his high hopes on departing Kiev for Byzantium those many years earlier, Harald arrived back in the court of King Yaroslav much as he had left – an unemployed mercenary – but with only about half the number of troops he had taken with him.

Yaroslav, figuratively speaking at least, was in the same boat. The massive losses of men and ships incurred in the ill-fated invasion of Byzantium, including his *voivode* Vyshata, had undoubtedly weakened his empire. Yet his son Vladimir had returned alive, and for a medieval ruler that was the most important thing. In that land of wood, ships were easily replaced, and most of the men lost on the expedition were probably foreign mercenaries, Pechenegs and Norsemen, whom Yaroslav might even have been glad to see gone. He had gained nothing, but he had risked little, and to a great extent Harald's return offset his losses. The greeting he extended his prodigal son indicates as much. The *Morkinskinna* recounts that Yaroslav gave Harald a "good reception," and Snorri called it "a most cordial welcome."

The Grand Prince had valid reason for that. Harald may have brought little with him in his escape from Constantinople, but then he did not have to. For years he had been sending it on ahead. He had departed Kiev reasonably well

off financially, but had returned quite wealthy. Extremely wealthy. According to the sagas, the richest man in the land. Richer even than Yaroslav, who had kept all Harald's loot in store for him – "all the gold he had sent ahead from Constantinople, valuable riches of all kinds." According to Snorri, "This treasure hoard was so immense that no one in Northern Europe could recall ever seeing so much wealth in one man's possession."

It comes as a bit of a wonder that the Grand Prince of Kievan Rus did not simply seize this fortune for himself, but not for nothing was he called Yaroslav the Great. He had no need. His share would come to him eventually, as what the Scandinavians called the *brudkaup*, the bride-price, for his daughter, Elisaveta.

At nineteen years of age Elisaveta had blossomed into a beautiful young woman. This we know because after a thousand years there still exists a portrait of her, probably (though not positively) done from life, right around the time of Harald's return to Kiev.

Yaroslav's great Cathedral of St. Sophia still stands in the city, though since Soviet times serving only as a museum and UNESCO World Heritage site. It is a Ukrainian national landmark, an architectural and historical marvel, its intricate interior adorned with 2,800 square feet of mosaics and 33,000 square feet of frescoes. In the central nave a painting spanning three walls once depicted the Grand Prince and five of his sons (he eventually had seven, a number of whom were interred in the cathedral, though only Yaroslav's sarcophagus survives), and his wife Queen Ingigerd and their four daughters. Over the centuries the paint has been heavily damaged and poorly restored, but the images of the girls have survived the best. The eldest, Anastasia, who would become queen of Hungary, leads behind their mother. The two youngest – Anne, the future Queen of France, and Agatha, whose fate is uncertain, but who may have been the wife of Edward the Exile, nominated but never crowned as the last Anglo-Saxon King of England – bring up the rear. Second in line, like Anastasia bearing an Orthodox-style tall, thin votive candle in her left hand and in her right some sort of offering, a prosphoron loaf or possibly a *tama* (a metal plaque symbolizing prayer), is Elisaveta.

She is dressed in layered, aristocratic Kievan fashion, with a full-length white gown or chemise under a *poneva*, a patterned, long-sleeved, calf-length

apron dress, and over all that a white cloak with embroidered edging, fastened at the right shoulder. Her hair, like that of her sisters, is modestly contained in a white coif, giving no clue of its color. The curve of her skirts gives a feel for her movement, which is graceful and serene. But all that can be seen of the girl herself, besides her hands, is her neck – slender and swanlike – and her face, which is round, smooth and pale. Elisaveta is the very ideal of Russian beauty.

By those pictured in the family portrait, it can be dated. Anastasia had married the exiled Duke Andrew of Hungary in 1037, a few years after Harald's departure, but the couple did not leave Kiev until Andrew returned home to become king ten years later, so the portrait predates that. Yaroslav's youngest son is not depicted, probably because he hadn't been born yet. By this, the fresco might be dated to right about the time Harald returned to Kiev, and since no one is depicted bundled up against the Rus winter, even to that summer of 1043. In fact, the painting may even be where and how Harald first saw Elisaveta on his return. On its completion the cathedral was not only a place of worship but a library and scriptorium, a center of court ceremonies, and a reception hall for visiting dignitaries. Harald's formal welcome home would have been given there, and attended by Elisaveta.

The princess was no longer the overdressed little girl Harald remembered. (Peasant girls, eligible for marriage from their early teens, would have considered her a spinster, but highborn women had fewer choices of suitable mates and often refrained from nuptials until their twenties.) No longer, either, did she see Harald as some outcast hired sword, come a-begging to her father's court. Here now was a man of the world, no longer a barbarian, but polished to civilized standards, fluent in Old Russian and Greek, a proven leader, wealthy beyond dreams, resplendent in his best Byzantine clothing, arms and armor. (Harald had famously had a mail coat made for him in Constantinople, which he named Emma. As that Germanic name means "whole," we might take it that its design was based on the full-length, all-enveloping scale armor worn by the Byzantine *kataphraktoi* heavy cavalry, whose name translates from the Greek as "completely armored.") A prince without a country, Harald was a prince nonetheless. And more than that, Elisaveta looked upon him as a woman looks on a man. As a bride-to-be looks upon her future husband.

Harald "brought up the issue of marriage to the prince [Yaroslav]," reports

the *Morkinskinna*, “pointing out that he had now acquired the requisite wealth, as well as a reputation for bravery. The prince replied that he would not delay the match any longer, but would now grant his wish.”

A modern cynic might look upon the *brudkaup* as a man buying a wife the way he might buy a slave. Technically the bride-price was paid to the bride’s father, as head of her family, for the privilege of assuming responsibility for her safety, but more realistically to compensate said family for an asset that might tie their power to that of her suitor (among aristocrats), or (among peasants) for the loss of her labor. In full knowledge that the marriage would be miserable without the bride’s willing participation, her opinion of the match – and her own worth – was usually respected. In Norway the minimum bride-price was twelve ounces of silver, equal to four or five cows. A man who could not afford that was unworthy of his suit.

As a princess Elisaveta was, of course, much more expensive than that, but Harald could well afford her.

The transaction was not all one-way. Also negotiated was the bride’s dowry, the *heiman fylgia*, “something from her home.” This was more between her and her father than her groom, being her share of her family’s wealth. It would remain her property even in divorce, and support her and her children in the event she was widowed.

Marriage terms were by tradition not written down (since in those days many participants were illiterate), but attended by at least six witnesses, in this case presumably including Harald’s seconds Ulf and Halldor, and sealed with a hand clasp between Harald and Yaroslav.

A betrothal was recognized with a church ritual – in modern Russian weddings, usually held on the same day as the marriage, but back then a separate ceremony in itself, held weeks or months in advance of the actual nuptials – marked by an exchange of vows and rings. A date was set for the wedding, until which it was considered unseemly for the groom to visit his bride. That left Harald with time on his hands to plan for married life, for the furtherance of his ambition. For it was his ambition to become more than a prince of the Rus. He desired to become a king of Scandinavia.

In Kiev there was fresh news from home. Across the Baltic, the heirs of Knut and Olaf had fallen to squabbling among themselves. Earlier that year young

Magnus had lain waste to Jomsburg on the north German coast, putting an end to the depredations of the still-pagan Norse who raided from there. In September he had subdued a Slavic army near Hedeby in Denmark, killing some 15,000 of them. And he had chased his wayward *jarl* Svein Ulfsson, the would-be king of the Danes, out of the country, but neither caught nor conquered him. As a result, neither man sat secure on his throne.

All this presented Harald with an interesting conundrum. A leader with his own army, not to mention royal blood, entering into that mix would easily tip the balance of power in favor of one contender or the other. It was a matter of choosing sides, and that was a matter of choosing who, Magnus or Svein, had the most to offer in return. Magnus was Harald's kinsman by blood, and Svein would be as well, albeit more distantly, by marriage. (Elisaveta was a niece of Sweden's King Onund, and Svein was his cousin.) Harald was Norwegian, and naturally aspired to that kingdom before Denmark. To that end it was not to his advantage to have Magnus solidify his grip on power. Svein, on the other hand, was said to be no laggard in battle, though success on the field was not often his.

To ally with King Magnus meant becoming his minion. To ally with Svein, a king without a kingdom, meant fighting at his side, as an equal.

Compared to all those machinations, negotiating a bride-price was easy.

Wedding customs in the medieval Eastern church and among the Norse are well known, but less well known is the extent to which they overlapped, as they certainly did in Kievan Rus. Many Christian rites incorporated old pagan traditions, and in those days when the new faith had only recently replaced the old, many ceremonies may have altered only to the extent that a different deity was in charge. We can look to modern Russian wedding traditions for a glimpse of the old ways.

Since friends and relatives and allies traveled a long way to attend a wedding (which was never held in winter, when such travel was difficult if not hazardous), the celebrations lasted a week, with the actual ceremony going on for three or four days. The bride and groom, kept separate, were ritually cleansed in a steam house and reclothed in finery symbolizing their new identities. The bride wore her best dress.[1] The groom's accoutrements included his finest sword, or possibly one handed down from his ancestors; as

Harald's ancestors were dead and far off, we might assume he wore his best gold-hilted Byzantine *spatha*.

On the appointed day, a Russian groom visits his bride's home, where she has been hidden by her friends and family, in order to "ransom" her. This is one of the oldest Russian wedding traditions – nowadays, an opportunity for the bridal party to have a little fun with the new son-in-law by setting him riddles and odd tasks, making him search the house to find his bride, substituting another woman or even a man under the bridal veil, and generally putting him through a little hell, but in the old days this was the formal exchange of the bride-price. Business done, the bride given away, her husband-to-be carries her off to church.

The ceremony itself would have been conducted in the Old Church Slavonic tongue handed down from 9th-century Byzantine missionaries. It bore closer resemblance to Greek than the common language of the Kievan people, Old East Slavic, much the way the Latin used by the Roman church was mysterious and incomprehensible to Western European laity. Eastern wedding vows might be thought of as more businesslike than Western, with the couple swearing they are not promised to any other, and are consenting to marriage of their own free will. There is much praying, blessing and biblical reading before getting down to the matter at hand. The rings having already been exchanged, marriage is bestowed by the placing of crowns on the couple's heads, symbolic of the honor awarded them by God. In the old days, among commoners, these were likely flower garlands, but considering their wealth and royal blood, Harald and Elisaveta likely wore real crowns. After more prayers and litanies and the couple's first drink from a common cup, the priest binds their hands with his own stole and leads them three times around the lectern bearing the holy book, symbolizing their life's journey, and pronounces them husband and wife. They are given two glasses, in order to break them; the more shattered glass, the more years of happy marriage in their future.

Now came the fun, starting with the *brudhlaup*, the "bride running." In Christianized ritual it became a slow, solemn procession to the wedding feast, but in ancient times (at least, as being revived in modern Scandinavian weddings) it is thought to have been a literal foot race between the bride's party and the groom's, with the losers to serve drinks to the winners for the duration of the evening. It is sometimes called the *brudgumareid*, or

“bridegroom’s ride,” with the groomsmen – in Harald’s case, including Ulf and Halldor – taking to horseback for an easy win.

At a wedding feast, rather than cake, the couple partook of a huge, decorated loaf of bread, the *korovai* – as the Russians still say, “bread is the head of everything,” the source of life – and salt, symbolizing prosperity. For both Russians today and Vikings then, it was bad form not to get drunk at a wedding. A Norse marriage was not even binding until consecrated with ale or mead served by the bride, symbolizing her acceptance of her new duties as a wife. In pagan times the groom toasted Thor, son of Odin, before passing the cup to his bride, who toasted Freya, goddess of fertility; at Harald and Elisaveta’s ceremony the toasts would have been to Jesus, as the son of God, and Mary as the virgin mother, but the sentiments were the same. By drinking from the same cup, two became one. Today the custom on the first toast is for attendees to complain that the wine is *gor’ko* – bitter – until the couple sweetens it with a kiss, and everyone breaks their glasses on the floor. Again, the more shattered glass, the better.

Eating, drinking, singing, drinking, dancing, drinking, more eating, more drinking. With both fighting and poetic skills being highly regarded among the Norse and Rus alike, their respective proponents freely indulged in *senna* or *flyting*, the art of insulting an opponent in the most clever, subtle manner, in verse. Naturally, as the alcohol flowed, a few matches degenerated from *flyting* to fighting, but as long as no one was murdered or too grievously injured, no harm done.

While everyone could still function, the newlyweds were escorted by torchlight from the hall to the nuptial bed by, again, at least six witnesses, who if necessary could later testify to the consummation of the union. The bride, still in her crown, went first, to be dressed in her nightclothes and arranged on the bed by her maids. On his arrival the groom ceremonially, symbolically removed the bride’s crown and, possibly still in front of witnesses, consummated the marriage.

Obligations achieved, the attendants left the two alone for more leisurely lovemaking, and so shall we. But consider….

The man who had lamented, in verse, of the scorn of the gold-ringed girl in Rus must have held her in high regard. Yet it is notable that according to the sagas he did not pen those stanzas until he had no chance of returning to Constantinople and the life, and women, he left behind. Harald had not seen

Elisaveta since his departure from Kiev a decade earlier, and could only have been pining after a vision, an ideal of her in his own mind. Yet he had known, too, the pleasures and debaucheries of Byzantium, both its brothels and its court. Whether in Harald's mind the girl in his nuptial bed measured up to that, we can never know.

Love, if it existed from the start or developed later, was a welcome plus in a medieval marriage, but it was neither essential nor even central to the match. It is very possible that wedding and bedding Elisaveta were simply two more steps in Harald's will to power. Evidence for this is in the sagas' complete lack of mention of any love between the two. Stuf the Blind, the skald who knew Harald many years later, when the relationship between him and Elisaveta had changed drastically, wrote of the marriage in the coldest terms, of which the then-king must have approved:

> The battle-giving monarch
> Won the marriage he desired.
> He gained a hoard of gold
> And the prince's daughter.

In the morning the wedding pact was concluded. The groom arose early to prepare for business, and the bride was attired by her maids as the woman of the house, with her hair no longer streaming free but braided and coiled and hidden under a coif the Norse called a *hustrulinet*. Suitably attired for her new role, she proceeded to the main hall to formally receive from her husband, again duly witnessed, the proceeds for her virginity: the *morgengifu*, the "morning-gift." Sometimes called the bride-veil fee, it was approximately equal to a third or a half of her dowry in value, but consisted more of material goods such as jewelry, dresses, and household items, farm animals and slaves. In Scandinavia it often included lands and estates as well, up to several hundred acres, though as Harald was still landless, that would have to wait.

But perhaps not for long.

Over the winter came news of a great battle off Aros, in the very southern tip of Norway. On the Sunday before Yuletide, the fleets of King Magnus and

Jarl Svein had come together under a storm of arrows, spears and sling-stones, and as their ships' bows meshed together the fighting went hand to hand. Outnumbered, and seeing his ship-borne shield wall accomplishing nothing, Magnus had personally led the attack on the enemy flagship, boarded and soon cleared its deck of Danes. In total seven of Svein's ships were captured, but Svein had escaped across to the island of Zealand, and from there to the Danish mainland. Magnus had followed, laying waste the countryside, but when Svein fled inland, the king returned to Norway. Stalemate.

It was time to tip the balance of power. Harald the prince now had his own princess. It was time he claimed a throne.

NOTE

1 White wedding gowns were unknown. Prior to the reign of Catherine II in the 1700s, Russian brides wore red.

XXI

Denmark

Harald, you sailed your longship,
Laden with rich cargo.
Success was granted you
And gleaming gold from Russia.
Through the hard storm, loyal king,
You steered your pitching ship,
And as the sea-spray eased
You finally sighted Sigtuna.

Valgard of Vollur

"In the spring," relates *King Harald's Saga*, "Harald set out from Novgorod and sailed downriver to the town at Lake Ladoga [Aldiegjuborg, modern Staraya Ladoga]. There he acquired ships and in the summer sailed west. He headed first for Sweden, and landed at Sigtuna."

As when Harald had last visited, Sigtuna was still the seat of King Onund Jacob, brother-in-law to Harald's brother Olaf. At that time, Olaf's widow Astrid and their daughter Ulfhild had resided at the Swedish court after her husband's death, but on Magnus's return they had followed him and his mother Alfhild, Astrid's former serving girl, to Norway. Now residing at Onund's court was another of his kin: his cousin, Svein of Denmark, the would-be king whom Magnus had driven into exile.

"Svein Ulfsson was the handsomest of all men," recounts the *Heimskringla*, which admittedly describes most main male characters in similarly flattering

terms. “He was also the biggest and strongest and a very great one for sports, and an excellent speaker as well. Everyone who knew him believed he possessed all the qualities that go into a good leader.”

A good leader perhaps, but not often a victorious one. Svein had suffered defeat after defeat at the hands of Magnus, yet somehow always managed to escape. When he met Harald at Sigtuna that autumn he was freshly returned from yet another beating. At Helgenaes, a peninsula jutting down into the Kattegat between Denmark and Norway, the two countries’ fleets had clashed again. “King Magnus had fewer men,” recounted Snorri in the *Heimskringla*, “but his ships were larger and better equipped.”

The battle commenced in the evening and was fought throughout the night, Magnus hurling spears with the best of them. “King Magnus won,” recorded Snorri, “and Svein escaped. His ship was entirely cleared of men, and all his other ships as well.”

The year of the battle of Helgenaes is variously given as 1043, 1044 or 1045, which is unfortunate, as it bears on the year of Harald’s return to Scandinavia, with the sagas stating that he met Svein in Sweden soon after the battle. Most biographers mark the year as 1045, but a chronology based on the sequence of prior events, going all the way back to Harald’s departure from Constantinople – also, as has been shown, a matter of some debate – might indicate it was 1044. It is unlikely that, as a protégé of Grand Prince Yaroslav, Harald could have remained in Constantinople very long after the Rus invasion in 1043. Snorri stated that he spent one winter in Kiev, and the *Morkinskinna* says he departed from Rus in the spring, which should have put him in Sweden later in 1044. According to the skald Valgard, who by his own description made the journey with Harald and Elisaveta, it was a rough voyage, storm-tossed and possibly delayed. Fellow skald Thjodolf concurred: “Harald’s waterlogged longship sailed with much gold, listing to the leeward under her broad sail. A raging storm fell upon the prince.” So Harald may not have arrived in Sweden until early 1045 and not met Svein until the *jarl*’s defeated return from Denmark later that year.

Whether 1044 or 1045, Harald arrived a bit too late. By virtue of Svein’s final escape to Sweden, and following years of turmoil after Hardaknut’s death, the situation in Scandinavia had finally stabilized. King Magnus, whom Harald remembered only as a fatherless boy in Kiev, now ruled both Norway and Denmark. Svein, on the other hand, survived only on the mercy

of his Swedish cousin Onund, who was willing to shelter him, but not fight with him. Repeated failed attempts had demonstrated that Svein could not permanently retake his Danish domains on his own. He required outside assistance. Money. Ships. Men.

Harald could offer him all three. According to the *Morkinskinna*, "Svein proposed that they should join forces in light of the fact that their birth entitled them to the realms that King Magnus ruled." Defeating Magnus together, Svein could then rule Denmark, and Harald Norway.

Interestingly, Snorri's *Heimskingla* has it that Harald agreed and the two immediately began planning their mutual assault on Magnus's realms. However, the *Fagrskinna* and *Morkinskinna*, written closer to the original sources, state that Harald kept his options open: "He replied that he did not want to reject Svein's friendship, but that he first wanted to meet with his kinsman King Magnus."

Harald was older than both – Magnus was only about twenty, and Svein about twenty-five – and clever to play them against each other, but also clever enough to harbor no illusions. He could expect a warm welcome home in Norway… as long as he bent the knee to Magnus.

But Harald's knee-bending days were over.

According to the sagas, that autumn Magnus and his fleet were at Skaney (modern Scania, now the southernmost province of Sweden but until 1658 part of Denmark) when they spotted a ship approaching from the east. And what a ship! According to the *Fagrskinna*, its sail was embroidered with gold thread. "It bore gilded dragons' heads, and it is claimed that there has never been another ship in the North decorated with so much gold and precious stones and fine cloth and many other displays of wealth."

The king sent a boat to greet it, and as it drew near the shore he and his men could see its crew and passengers were accoutered just as richly. Their spokesman, tall and noble in appearance, inquired whether Magnus's uncle Harald Sigurdsson would be welcomed, considering their mutual kinship and loyalty to old King Olaf, and that Harald was renowned for his wisdom and deeds, not to mention his wealth. "He can greatly aid his nephew," the messenger advised, "but also become a deadly adversary if sufficient honor and esteem is not rendered him."

“I expect only good things from all my allies and subjects,” Magnus replied, “but most of all from my uncle, both his guidance and assistance, and I would be overjoyed if he joined me.”

At this the messenger came ashore and revealed himself as Harald in the flesh, come to greet his nephew. According to the *Heimskringla*, Magnus, fair-skinned and blond, was of average height. Harald would have towered over him, but his nephew, known to be quick-witted and unafraid in battle, would not be intimidated. “King Magnus went forward personally to greet him,” recounts the *Morkinskinna*, “together with his entire retinue, and gave him the warmest of welcomes.”

Harald proceeded to regale the Viking crowd with tales of his exploits, from his escape from Stiklestad to his escape from Constantinople and the journey from Kievan Rus. For his part Magnus updated his uncle on events in Norway: how he, his mother, Queen Astrid and her daughter Ulfhild had entered the country unopposed; how he had shown mercy to the Norwegians who had fought against his father Olaf, even the regicide Kalf Arnason (though untrusting Kalf had fled to the Orkneys, where he stirred up trouble for Harald’s old friend and savior Rognvald Brusason, whom Magnus had named *jarl*). Now known across the land as Magnus the Good, King of Norway and Denmark, he had even sent inquiries across the sea to England, to learn if its King Edward the Confessor intended to honor his brother and predecessor Hardaknut’s promise that Magnus should inherit the English throne as well. Alas, Edward had sworn an oath that he would die before allowing England to become part of Norway again. And Magnus, deciding he was satisfied with his kingdom as it was, had declined to pursue his claim.

If all this was intended to impress Harald, Magnus erred. To forgive Kalf and forgo Edward would be seen by Harald only as signs of weakness. The constant wars between Magnus and Svein had bled his nephew to the point that Magnus could no longer hope to rebuild Knut’s old North Sea Empire. Was he strong enough to defend what remained? According to the *Morkinskinna*, Harald had the grace to find out by peaceful means first: “Harald inquired how King Magnus would prefer to divide the kingdom between them.”

It is easy to imagine every fighting man who heard this proposal very consciously not reaching for his sword or axe, and surreptitiously looking around to make sure nobody else did, either. Harald did not have the

manpower to fight a war, but he had enough to kill Magnus then and there, claim his crown, and dare anyone to take it back.

Magnus, to his credit, remained cool. “King Magnus gave his uncle a friendly answer,” reports the *Morkinskinna*, “saying that he would take the advice of his chieftains and the wishes of his subjects.”

Chief among these was Einar Thambarskelfir. This fat old lord (his epithet translates as “Paunch-Shaker”; he was about sixty-five that year) was the last of the *jarls* of Lade, a powerful dynasty who for 200 years had ruled near Trondheim. He had fought alongside King Olaf Tryggvason at the battle of Svolder in the year 1000, escaping after Olaf threw himself into the sea. He had opposed Harald’s brother and Magnus’s father Olaf from the start, but missed the battle at Stiklestad because he was in England currying favor from Knut the Great, which had done him little good. Passed over like Kalf Arnason for title and power in favor of Knut’s son Svein, Einar had joined Kalf in journeying to Rus to fetch Magnus back to Norway. He had sworn an oath to Yaroslav and Ingigerd to serve as the boy king’s foster father and regent, and had held himself to it. It was Einar who had secured the inheritance agreement between Magnus and Hardaknut. He was the power behind the throne, and it would have surprised no one that the young king deferred to his judgment.

“You were far away, Harald,” Einar said now, “while we won this land from Knut and his people, and we have no wish to be divided up among kings. It has been our way to serve one king a time, and that is how it will stay as long as King Magnus lives and reigns. Know, then, that to the best of my ability, I oppose you attaining the crown.”

Harald doubtless took a lesson from this, in how not to be a king. Norse society, with its *things* and beginnings of democracy, was one of the most egalitarian in medieval Europe, but that was not Harald’s way. His was the old Viking way – the way of one-man rule, of bloody-handed kings. With the rest of Magnus’s chieftains following Einar’s lead, and Magnus following their advice, the young king’s life and reign might well have ended on the spot.

Harald, though, could see things were against him. He could not take Norway with little more than a boatload of men. And if he had lost some respect for Magnus as king, there may have been something left of his respect for the blood of St. Olaf in that he did not try to kill his nephew. Likewise,

that Magnus did not try to kill Harald, but let him go on his way safely, though surely not happily. The *Morkinskinna* admits, “Harald took his leave, though his honor was tarnished.”

No one present at the meeting could have expected anything less than civil war to ensue from it. Magnus and his men, however, had been fighting a civil war against Svein for years. It made little difference to them if they went on fighting it against Harald.

But now they would fight it against Harald *and* Svein.

“[Harald] returned and arranged a meeting with *Jarl* Svein Ulfsson,” report the sagas. “They now met and united with the goal of Harald claiming Norway and Svein taking Denmark. They would work together to seize both lands from King Magnus.”

And Thjodolf put it in verse:

> Now for seafaring warriors
> Serious fear shakes the spirit.
> The army boards ships offshore,
> There is little hope of peace.
> Magnus means to sail south,
> Equipped for war,
> While Harald fits out his sea dragons to go north.

XXII

TREACHERY

Battle-rejoicing king,
The ship put to sea
Beneath you from Sweden;
Your due inheritance awaited you.
The ship carried its sail high
As it swept past flat Scania
And you terrorized
The women of the Danes.

Valgard of Vollur

"Harald and Svein readied a fleet and soon gathered a large army," records *King Harald's Saga*. "When the forces were ready, they raised sail west for Denmark."

During 1045, Harald and Svein sacked the islands of Zealand and Fyn (modern Funen). The wonder is that, after years of warfare between Svein and Magnus, there was anything left to loot. By the sagas' count some of the villages and farmsteads of the Kattegat islands changed hands four times, always at a high cost in blood and loss. The Icelandic poet Valgard took part in the raids and plundering and wrote in tribute to Harald, delighting in dented helms and riven shields, villages burned and wolves feasting on the dead: "Those Danes who survived, ran for their lives, but their women were taken. Shackled maidens were dragged down to the ships. Women wept as bright fetters cruelly bit their tender flesh."

It speaks ill of the Danish *jarl* that he would see his once and future subjects put through such misery for his personal ambition. Perhaps, from his viewpoint, they were not his subjects until they were made to submit to such punishment.

And what was in it for Harald? He had laid no claim to the Danish throne, nor were the Danes his people. If he showed any mercy, it was for a reason. The survivors of whom Valgard wrote would carry word of the attacks north. Harald was sending a clear message to his nephew that retribution was on its way.

The message was received. Magnus, learning that Harald and Svein had allied and were laying waste to Denmark, knew it could only be a matter of time until they turned north to conquer Norway. The survivors spoke of Harald, in particular, in the most unnerving terms: “taller and stronger than normal men, so clever that nothing was beyond him, ever triumphant in battle, and moreover so rich with gold that he had no equal.”

After years of fighting Svein, Magnus’s treasury was in no shape to finance a war against such a deep-pocketed foe. The king blamed his situation on Einar Thambarskelfir and the rest of his chieftains. According to the *Morkinskinna*, “He came to believe they had been misguided when they advised him to rebuff Harald. He claimed this would be an everpresent threat to the kingdom.”

For their part, the landowners – only now realizing the menace Harald posed to their own power – reasoned that it would be better to have him on their side than against them. They urged Magnus to reconsider and come to terms with his uncle. The king called a levy of all available troops to defend the kingdom, but he also sent a messenger by fast boat to extend a peace feeler to Harald, to the effect that he had reconsidered and was willing to share the kingdom equally… if Harald would do the same with his fortune.

The messenger found Harald agreeable to such terms.

Raiding and plundering defenseless Danish villages was one thing, but civil war in Norway was another. Harald was Norwegian, but not a king. He had no power to tax. If it came to war, the initial cost would come out of his own pocket anyway, with no guarantee of getting his money back in spoils, let alone victory, and a not inconsiderable risk of losing it all. He well

remembered how his brother Olaf had fared against a united Norway, and Olaf's refusal to loot ahead of the battle at Stiklestad because he would be razing his own prospective country. It would be cheaper, easier and better all around for Harald to buy half the country and recoup his investment by taxation, rather than lay half of it to waste for nothing.

He sent the messenger back to Magnus, secretly agreeing to the king's terms. Now all he had to do was figure out how to rid himself of his ally, Svein, without being accused of treachery.

It was was not long after Harald sealed his pact with Magnus that he found his opportunity. That evening, as the two were getting into their cups, Svein happened to ask Harald which of his possessions he valued most. Harald replied it was his raven banner, *Landeydan*, Land-Waster. Svein inquired, reasonably, what it was about a flag that made it so valuable, to which Harald replied that whoever carried it into battle was victorious. He himself had found it to be so.

A few depictions of traditional Norse raven banners have survived, on coins and on the famous Bayeux Tapestry. They were not square like baroque flags, or rectangular like modern ones, but right-triangular and quarter-circular, fringed with tassels or ribbons. The raven – clever, bold, but an eater of the dead – was symbolic of Odin, whose pet ravens Huginn and Muninn set out at dawn each day, flew across the world, and returned to his shoulders at breakfast with all the news; one of Odin's many names was *Hrafnagud* (Raven-God).

Raven banners had a long tradition in Viking lore, going at least as far back as the invasion of Wessex by the Great Heathen Army, led by Ubba, son of Ragnar Lodbrok, in the year 878. Ubba flew a *gudfani*, a gonfalon or war flag called *Hrafn* (Raven), said to have been sewn in one day by three of his sisters. It was also said of this flag that if the Danes were to be victorious the raven would be seen flapping its wings, but if they faced defeat, it drooped.

It can be presumed that it drooped at the battle of Cynwit in Devon that year, when the West Saxons not only killed Ubba but took his raven flag as a trophy. At the battle of Assandun (modern Ashdon or Ashingdon in Essex) in 1016, King Knut carried a white banner on which a raven was said to appear, flapping its wings. Knut defeated the English under King Edmund Ironside,

completing his conquest of England. And later Siward, called Digri, “the Stout,” landing in Northumbria in search of a dragon (possibly a reference to the wyvern flag of the Saxons), received a raven banner from an old man on a hill, whom he took to be Odin and who advised him to enter the service of King Edward of England. Edward named him Earl of Northumbria. Siward went on to father Earl Waltheof, who would ultimately fight Harald at Fulford.

Svein, who was best known for losing battles, told Harald, “I will trust in your flag’s power after you fight three battles against your nephew King Magnus and come away with three victories.”

Instead of accepting the challenge, Harald took offense. “I know my relation with Magnus and do not need you to remind me of it,” he told Svein. “We are at war, he and I, but that does not mean we can not come to terms.”

Now it was Svein who bristled in anger. “It is said, Harald, that you only keep your word when it suits you.”

Harald said, “It might also be said that I have broken my word less often than King Magnus would claim you have broken yours.”

Before they came to blows, the two parted company (or were parted) for the night. Harald went to his quarters aboard his ship but told his servant, “I will sleep elsewhere tonight, for I believe there is treachery in the air. I noticed this evening that my kinsman Svein took offense at my honest words.” He laid a log in his bed and threw blankets over it. “Keep a lookout here tonight, in case something happens.”

The chronicles tell two versions of what happened next. According to the *Morkinskinna*, two arrows were shot from afar at Harald’s bed, striking the footboard. The way *King Harald’s Saga* tells it, a lone man in a boat tied up alongside the king’s longship, climbed aboard with an axe and, seeing the blanket-wrapped log in the prince’s bed, sank his blade into it, leaving it there as he leaped back into his boat and escaped. Either way, Harald roused his men.

“There you see the perfidy of the Danes,” he told them. “This was intended for me. We had best look after ourselves. They have betrayed King Magnus and are likely to betray us too.”

At sunup Harald convened a *thing*, an assembly, to decide a way forward. It was not his fault, he said, if the bond between him and Svein was broken, considering how Svein had broken his oath to Magnus.

Svein, on the other hand, defended his break with Magnus as something not done lightly, but because the Norwegian king had claimed his rightful Danish realm. And he laid guilt for the attempted assassination directly on Harald: “He most likely came up with this plan himself. There is no need to blame it on anyone else.”

That was beside the point for Harald. Afterwards he told his men, “It is plain that we do not have the manpower here to battle Svein if he has chosen to go oppose us. Our best chance is to get away now, while we still can. Let us cast off and row away in silence.”

That night, before Svein even knew they were gone, Harald and his men weighed anchor and sailed north. They landed at Vik, on the southern shore of the Sognefjord, Norway’s largest and deepest, extending over 120 miles inland, and rowed up it to reach Oppland (“the upper land,” modern Innlandet), Harald’s ancestral home. By alternating gifts and threats he convinced the landowners there – many of whom had been perfectly happy under Magnus – to name him king.

When Magnus got wind of this he landed his own fleet at Vik, seeking to learn whether his uncle intended to honor their agreement or make a fight of it. At this point, with both sides suspecting the other would renege, nobody was sure it would not come to war. Harald, however, was simply establishing a position of strength for himself from which to approach Magnus, as per their agreement, as an equal instead of a supplicant. Friends and relatives of the two leaders interceded, establishing a truce until things could be worked out, king to king. They agreed to meet on neutral ground at Aker gard (Acre farm), off the far eastern tip of Sognefjord – a bit out of the way, but sacred ground, the site of *thing* meetings since ancient times.

For the first three days, it was agreed, Magnus was to act as host. Harald, alert for more treachery, took sixty men with him to the meeting hall. Magnus and his retinue arrived bearing gifts. He presented a sword to the man seated closest to the door – the lowest in the pecking order – a shield to the next, then clothing, weapons, gold, in increasing worth as he worked his way up the ranks until he reached Harald… to whom he presented nothing more than a pair of reeds. “Uncle, which reed would you accept as my gift?”

Harald must have thought it some kind of bad joke, but he played along. “The one nearest me.”

And Magnus said, “With this twig I bequeath you half the kingdom of

Norway, including all the expenses and income and lands pertaining to it, on one condition. You will be king of Norway, as my equal, but when we are together, I will have precedence in all things. If another king visits us, my seat will be in the center. My ship will have pride of place in the royal harbor. You will support me and strengthen me in view of the fact that I have elevated you to a status in Norway that I thought no one else would attain in my lifetime."

Harald agreed, got to his feet and thanked Magnus for the honor. Everyone let out a deep breath, and the two kings of Norway then sat down to a feast, which lasted into the evening. The *Heimskringla* records, believably, "they were quite merry that day."

King Harald then fulfilled his part of the bargain, inviting King Magnus and sixty of his retainers to another feast where he likewise presented all of them with gifts in ascending order. When he got to Magnus, he set out two chairs and asked Magnus to choose one. When Magnus was seated, Harald ordered his treasure brought forth. "I have traveled to many lands and taken many risks in order to earn all this gold. Now I will share it with you. This money is to be ours equally, just as the realm of Norway is ours equally. I know that we differ when it comes to wealth, you being a lot more generous than I, but each of us can do as he likes with his share."

Harald's treasure chests were emptied out on the floor. No one present had ever seen such a fortune in Scandinavia, but then this was Byzantine gold, the sagas recall, and everyone knew the Greek emperor had houses full of gold.

A scale and weights were set out, and the treasure was divided between the two kings. They were again said to be very merry, and why not? They were now both rich and powerful, equally so.

Yet already trouble lay beneath the surface.

According to the sagas, the treasure counters came upon a huge nugget of solid gold, the size of a man's head. (The *Morkinskinna* says it was a gold goblet.) Harald raised it up – no mean feat in itself, for a nugget that size would weigh about 120 pounds – and asked Magnus, "Nephew, what gold have you to compare to this?"

Magnus admitted, "Almost all the wealth that has been raised in taxes was spent on wars and armies. The only gold I have myself is this arm ring."

He removed the armlet and gave it to Harald, who recognized it.

"This is not much for a king of two kingdoms," he said. "And some would

say it is not even rightfully yours."

One can imagine the boisterousness of the hall given pause.

Magnus told Harald, "If that bracelet is not rightfully mine, then I do not know what is, for my father Olaf gave it to me the last time I saw him."

Only some of the sagas have Harald laughing at this. "It is true, king, that your father gave it to you, after he took it from my father without good cause. It was not easy being a petty king in Norway when your father ruled them all."

The sagas do not say who ended up with the armlet, only that it was the first disagreement between the two kings of Norway.

XXIII

KINGS OF THE NORTH

Generous king,
The fertile land was granted you
When you met Magnus
And presented him gold.
The treaty between you kinsmen
Was maintained most peacefully,
But from that point forward
Svein could expect nothing but war.

Bolverk Arnorsson

"When Svein heard that Harald and Magnus had agreed to unite their armies," recounts *King Harald's Saga*, "he sailed with his men to the east coast of Scania and remained there until that winter, when he heard that Harald and Magnus had withdrawn north to Norway, taking their warriors with them." The Danish *jarl* bided his time, certain that the two Norwegian kings would soon fall to fighting each other, destroying the loser and leaving the winner weaker against him.

Over the course of 1046, at least, they adhered to their agreement, sometimes together, often separately. They ranged as far north as Nidaros, modern Trondheim, where Olaf the Saint lay buried. (It was said that Magnus kept the key to his father's shrine and saw to the preservation of the body, to which miracles were still attributed.) Rather oddly of the two kings, neither was all that interested in defending Denmark from Svein's ever-present

threat, but more in securing their own power in Norway.

And just as Svein expected, it was not long before they began clashing. Once, when the two were sailing their ships together, Harald chanced to arrive first at their destination, and moored his longship at the royal dock. When Magnus arrived and saw Harald lying at anchor in his place, with his sail furled for the night and tents raised on deck, he ordered his own sail furled, but for battle, and told his rowers to man their oars and the rest to take up weapons. If Harald would not move, they would move him.

Harald saw Magnus's longship bearing down on them, its crew armed and armored. He ordered his crew, "Cut the anchor rope and row the ship away from the dock. My nephew is angered."

His ship swiftly vacated the anchorage, and Magnus moved his in. Afterward Harald circled back and took a few men with him over to his fellow king's vessel, where Magnus welcomed them. Harald said, "We thought we were all friends, but just now we had some doubts about your intent. It is true, as people say, that youth is impulsive, and I am willing to think, nephew, that your actions were the result of youth."

But Magnus said, "It was due to my heritage, not my youth, that I honored our agreement – what I gave you and what I retained for myself. If this little overstep of yours had been allowed to blemish my honor, it would soon be followed by another. I will keep to the agreement we made and concede everything I gave you, but I also insist on everything from you that is my right."

At this Harald rose to return to his ship. "It is an old saying," he remarked, "that the wiser man should give way."

Not only the two kings, but their men were divided on this. It was said Harald had indeed shown wisdom and good behavior, but that he had been shamed, and further that Magnus had pressed the point for that very purpose, even perhaps hoping Harald would break his oath. On top of that, claim the sagas, "many people were evil enough to try to sow trouble between them."

Trouble was made easier to sow when Harald, at age thirty-one – old for a man of his time – took that step that all kings must take to secure their legacy: He became a father.

Queen Elisaveta – Elisif, as she was known to her Norwegian subjects – was safely delivered of a baby girl, Ingigerd. We can assume the birth occurred during the summer, while Harald was away impressing his new

subjects, because had he been present no self-respecting Viking ruler would name a first daughter after his mother-in-law ahead of his mother. It may speak to some homesickness on the part of Elisaveta that she hoped her daughter's name would reach back to Rus and please her own mother, but Harald does not seem to have resented it. His mother, Queen Asta, was long gone, beyond such cares. In those patriarchal times a little princess was less important than a little prince but was still a useful bargaining chip in foreign relations, who could be married off to cement treaties much the way Elisaveta had been married to Harald.

The complication was that Magnus had a daughter as well. (He had married off his half-sister Ulfhild, Queen Astrid's daughter, to Ordulf, the future Duke of Saxony, in November 1042. She would play no role in the succession.) Little is known of Ragnhild Magnusdottir, and even less of her mother, who is not so much as named in the sagas and was likely some lowly *frilla*, a concubine. (Like father, like son.) In 1046 Ragnhild was only about five years old, and the agreement between Harald and Magnus had not specified who would inherit what, should one of them die.

During their dual reign Magnus demonstrated why he was called "the Good." He bestowed an earldom on a chieftain who had once spared his enemy Svein's life in battle and showed benevolence to Thrand, a kinsman of his father's killer, Kalf Arnason. Harald, meanwhile, played the villain of the pair, and was not necessarily playing. He was no friend of Kalf, and even less so because of the deference this kinsman showed to Magnus. He sent a dozen warriors disguised as monks, who surprised Thrand's field hands and gave them a beating, but Thrand and his men trapped the "monks" in his hall and gave them a beating in turn. When the kings heard of this, Harald was furious, but Magnus was pleased. He warned Thrand that Harald would seek retribution and advised him to escape to Greenland. Even as Thrand set sail, Harald came upon him, and only the approach of Magnus's ship headed off a fight and allowed Thrand to get away.

Then came a feast with Magnus and his men on one side of the table, and Harald and his men on the other. Harald was across from Magnus's half-brother Thorir, son of Olaf's ex-slave concubine Alfhild, who had since taken on another man. Harald did not think much of the seating arrangement, and at

one point remarked, “Be quiet, Thorir! You are not to be trusted. Even your father was called Hvinngestr [‘Thief-guest’].”

Thorir, not clever with words, made no reply, but the insult weighed on him. Magnus noticed, and when Thorir explained, gave his brother a suitable comeback. The next day, when Harald brought up his father again, Thorir recited it, in verse: “He never served as mare for a stallion, as did your father Sigurd Sow.”

Harald drew sword, but before he could strike, Magnus intervened. After that Thorir was seated closer to his brother at feasts.

The farmers and lesser lords began to prefer dealing with Magnus, especially in matters of taxation, which Harald proved heavy-handed in exacting. It eventually reached the point that it was the subject of a *thing* meeting, with the farmers taking the position that Magnus, as prior king, deserved his due, while Harald simply demanded payment as his right. Fat old Einar Thambarskelfir warned Magnus, “You are going to have a hard time holding the realm against King Harald.”

“You are riding high, Einar,” warned Harald in turn, “and you never fail to make plain your hostility to me. It will be a happy day when you receive your due. Right now you are a head taller than everyone else. Then, you will be a head shorter.”

So concluded that meeting.

Not all interactions between the kings were as potentially deadly. Some, in retrospect at least, even verged on the humorous. Once Magnus and Harald were dining together when the skald Arnor Thordarson was summoned to their table. Arnor was famously called Jarlaskald, “the Earls’ Poet,” for having served the *jarls* of Orkney, Harald’s old friend Rognvald Brusason and his uncle Thorfinn Sigurdsson.[1] Arnor, who remains one of the most famous Norse poets of the 11th century, had graduated from writing poems for earls to writing one for each of the two kings of Norway, and had been invited to recite them. On his arrival he announced himself to guards at the door: “Stand aside for the kings’ skald.”

Harald, being a minor practitioner and major aficionado of the skaldic art, inquired, “Which king is to hear his poem first?”

Arnor said, “The youngest.”

This, as another matter of precedence, of course irked Harald. “Why so?”

Arnor was experienced enough at dealing with lords to give offense in small amounts, and equally. “Lord, it is said that youth is impatient.”

Having established his authority somewhat, the skald now launched into the strophic, epic poem for which he remains most famous: the *Hrynhenda*, “rhythm throwing” (also called the *Magnusdrapa*, “Song of Magnus,” though Arnor would compose a later poem with that title as well), of which no fewer than twenty verses survive. It was unique in its day for its *hrynhenda* measure – eight syllables with four stresses, with each line ending unstressed – as opposed to the more typical court measure or *drottkvaet* of six syllables with three stresses, yet still retaining the latter’s alliteration and rhyme. The *Morkinskinna* quotes it at length, as well as Harald’s opinion of it. Interestingly, Snorri declined to include either the poem or the scene in his *Heimskringla*, probably because it does not reflect well on his subject. Warrior kings are inspiring. Peevish ones, not so much.

Arnor’s epic begins with the earls of Orkney and his own adventures there. As the skald warmed to his subject, Harald complained to Magnus, “Why should we listen to him go on about nothing but his own travels and the *jarls* of the west?”

“Be patient, uncle,” replied Magnus. “I suspect that by the time he finishes, you will think that I have had more than enough praises.”

On cue, Arnor set to lauding the younger king, admiring his courage, calling him the lord of various lands and superior to every other king, and wishing for his continued prosperity above and beyond theirs.

Here Harald had to interrupt. “Praise this king as much as you like, but take care not to disparage other kings.”

Arnor went on to pay tribute to Magnus’s skill as a sea captain and his longship *Visund* (*Bison*, named for the wisent, the European wood bison, highly regarded by the Norse for its strength, and in ensuing centuries hunted practically to extinction for its hide and for drinking horns). Built by Olaf, it was famous for its gilded prow, in the shape of a wisent head. “Never,” claimed Arnor, “will such a magnificent ship sail beneath a more illustrious king.”

Harald had to sit and listen as Arnor further expounded on Magnus as an enemy of opposing monarchs and a scourge of thieves, the sight of whose ship was like “a sunrise on a clear day or beacons burning in the distance.”

“This fellow really has the wind in his sails,” Harald said. “I can hardly wait to see where he goes from here.”

Finally Arnor worked up to his climax. “When the magnanimous king sails his ship atop the waves, it seems to men as though all God’s angels fly as one across the sea. It is said all men love that destroyer of fleets, more than anything but God himself. You and your men will be remembered forever.”

Once the cheering and pounding of drinks on tables died down, Arnor turned to his second poem, the one about Harald: the *Blagagladrapa*, the “Poem of the Black Goose,” meaning the raven. Of this, the sagas record only that “it was a good poem.”

When it was over, Harald was asked which he thought was better. “The difference is plain,” he said. “My poem will soon be forgotten, with no one able to recite it, but the poem written about King Magnus will be sung as long as there are men in the North.”

In this, as a critic of poetry, Harald was correct. Although only parts of the *Hrynhenda* survive, the entire *Blagagladrapa* has long since been lost to history.

Sensing Harald’s disappointment, Arnor promised to compose a eulogy for him, assuming the king died first; small consolation. Nevertheless, Harald rewarded the skald with a gold-inlaid spear, and Magnus gave him a gold armlet. Arnor slipped the armlet over the spear shaft and held them up for all to see: “I raise both royal gifts to the heavens.”

As he went out, Harald grumbled, “I thought he would never shut up.”

Meanwhile, once Svein was sure both kings had left Denmark defenseless, he again moved in with his men and claimed all the tax revenue due to the Norwegians. Magnus and Harald duly raised their army and went down to meet him. The sagas report they put many Danes in fetters and reaped a great deal of money from those who had sworn fealty to Svein – one wonders how much and how many could be left – but were unable to bring the renegade earl to battle. The closest they got was when they were advancing on a forest and a lone warrior rode out from among the trees to meet them, richly dressed and well equipped, expertly putting his horse through its paces before the astonished Norwegians. Finally he called out, “I have mistreated King Magnus, and King Harald has mistreated me. King Magnus and King Harald

are not the same kind of kings." Then he turned and vanished into the woods.

Harald's reaction is not recorded, but Magnus is said to have thought the unknown champion to be Svein in the flesh: "If his troops were as brave as he is, he might win more battles."

Nevertheless, Svein once again abandoned Denmark and fled to Sweden. Over the summer the two Norwegian kings wrenched their southern realm back into the northern fold. Surely some of the conquerors must have looked across the North Sea toward England, so long the missing piece of empire. But to take England they would have to turn their backs on Svein, and that they could not do.

At some point in this interim – the date was not written down and can only be guessed as sometime in 1047 – Elisaveta gave birth again, to another daughter. For this child it appears the king was, if not in the same room, at least in the vicinity for the birth. Strong proof of this is that his second daughter's name was almost certainly Harald's choice, not his queen's. Just as no Viking overlord would name a daughter after his mother-in-law, no queen – or wife – would choose for a daughter's name that of her husband's former lover: Maria. Harald's second daughter was unique among Norse women, the first to bear that very Mediterranean name.

(It is likely that by this time Harald had received news that a few years earlier, in 1044 or '45, Maria Skleraina had passed away in Constantinople. The official cause of death was bronchial infection – she had been asthmatic for years – but coming so soon on the heels of Harald's departure, we should wonder if she had made a fatal mistake in leaving him to return to the imperial palace. Those who crossed Zoe too often were liable to die before their time. The citizenry never took to Maria the way they loved their empress, and in 1044, when a rumor spread that the *Sebaste* was planning to assassinate Zoe and Theodora, the mob nearly rose up against Emperor Constantine and was only restrained when the Porphyrogenitae appeared on a balcony to reassure them. It was perhaps coincidental that, not long afterward, Maria died. For his part, the emperor Constantine seems to have been sincerely heartbroken, having her interred in the monastery of St. George in Mangana, which he had built as a source of income for her. Today the site lies under the Topkapi Palace, at the high point of modern

Istanbul.)

Two daughters in a row, however, may have proved worrisome to Harald. Eventually he would have to divide his precious fortune to pay two dowries. That at least could be written off as buying him allies among sons-in-law. More troubling was that his queen had provided Harald no sons of his own. In those days it was thought that some women could only bear children of one sex. Was Elisif one of them? Harald's only consolation was that neither did Magnus have sons. If both kings died, their Norwegian-Danish empire would be broken up among the girls, Ragnhild, Ingigerd and Maria, or the three (and their regents) would fall to fighting over the scraps.

But only if both kings died.

The sagas differ on just how long the dual reign of Harald and Magnus lasted. According to Snorri's *Heimskringla* it was about a year (1046–47), and the *Agrip* agrees, but according to the *Morkinskinna*, two (1045–47). The end point, however, is well known: October 25, 1047.

In the days leading up to it, while the Norwegian fleet lay off Sudathorp (modern Soderup, on the island of Zealand), Magnus dreamed that his father Olaf came to him and gave him a choice of living to old age but committing a crime of which he could never be absolved, or joining his father in the afterlife. In the dream Magnus asked Olaf to choose. Olaf chose the afterlife. Soon afterward the king fell sick with a fever, and it became obvious to all that he was dying. He was only twenty-three. Considering Harald's experience with Empress Zoe in Constantinople, he might have been suspected of poisoning his rival, but no such accusations appear in the sagas.

The *Morkinskinna* plays out the critical scene in very real conversation. At the king's bedside, Einar Thambarskelfir urged Magnus, "Now you must say to everyone what needs to be said, lord, and render sound advice while there is still time."

"So I will, for it seems likely this illness is to be the end of our friendship." Magnus summoned Harald and told him, "As I lie dying, uncle, I wish to ask that you make peace with my friends."

Harald said, "By rights I should do as you ask, but your friends are not necessarily my friends. They regard me with suspicion."

At this point Einar told Magnus: "There is no point in such talk. He has

already decided what to do, whatever he promises now."

"Is it not most fitting," asked Harald, "and my first responsibility, to befriend *my* friends?"

Einar ignored him. "Go on, majesty," he told Magnus, "and declare what is most important for the good of the realm."

Magnus then rendered the last decision of his life. He told Harald, "I advise, kinsman, that you go home to your ancestral lands in Norway, to defend and rule over them as best you can, but give up any wish to reign here in Denmark. It was my agreement with Hardaknut that, although mine, it should not remain in my family, and the same with Norway if it had been his. Denmark is to be Svein's. Let him rule it in peace. I hereby relinquish all claim to that kingdom."

Why, having spent years warring with Svein over Denmark, Magnus would in the end choose to simply hand it over to him is a bit of a mystery, but men facing death – as had Emperor Michael IV – often try to make amends for things done in life. Magnus had held himself to the letter of his agreement with long-dead Hardaknut. He had not chosen to fight the Danes, but had the fight forced on him due to Earl Svein breaking his own oath. Yet if what Magnus said of his pact with Hardaknut was true – that on his death Denmark was intended to pass from his family, and from Norway – then the final dissolution of the old North Sea Empire would seem to have been built into the agreement.

But Harald had made no such agreement. He had agreed to become co-king of all Norway, and as far as he was concerned, Denmark was just its southernmost province. He had paid Magnus, and paid him well, for said lands. Their pact had been that each king could do with his share of the gold as he pleased, but not with the realm. If Magnus had given part of the fortune to Svein, that was one thing, but now he was giving away part of the kingdom.

Harald told Magnus, "I believe both Norway and Denmark are rightfully mine, if you should die."

"It is not so," Magnus said, "though I suspect that my wishes will not be carried out. Despite that, you are not destined to rule over Denmark, whether you heed my advice or not."

In the retelling, one can practically hear Harald thinking aloud. "What is left of the gold that I brought to Norway, of which I gave half to you?"

“Look over the tables here, kinsman,” Magnus said. “The men seated here are of the highest quality and greatly respected. It is to them I have given my gold, and for it received their love and loyalty. Surely the allegiance of a good man is worth more than gold.”

That was clearly not Harald’s opinion. Without another word, he got up and went out.

Einar remained at Magnus’s bed. “Lord, how do you advise your brother Thorir? I do not believe it will do him much good to pledge fealty to King Harald.”

That was putting it mildly. Magnus called for his half-brother and instructed him to hide himself until the inevitable happened. Then he was to go seek out King Svein – yes, according to the *Morkinskinna*, Magnus referred to Svein as king. “Give the king my warmest tidings and inform him that I have abandoned my claim to his realm and wish him well with it. I believe his is the rightful claim and that Denmark’s future is brightest with him reigning over it.”

Thorir, unable to speak, obeyed.

When the end came, Harald was back at his nephew’s side. Magnus officially bestowed on him the kingdom of Norway, but not Denmark. According to the sagas, “Harald had little to say.”

Magnus’s last act was to give his page an ornamented knife and belt. When the king died the servant was so overcome that he fainted, and when he awoke both knife and belt were gone.

So was Harald, King of Norway.

NOTE

1 Ominously, those two, who for eight years had shared power much like Magnus and Harald, had fallen out over the arrival of Kalf Arnason, who was uncle to Thorfinn’s wife. Like Harald, Rognvald still held Kalf’s treachery at Stiklestad against him, and dragged the Orkneys into civil war over it. About the time Magnus and Harald became co-kings, Thorfinn’s men caught and killed Rognvald, of whom the *Orkneyinga Saga* claims, “of all the earls of Orkney he was the most adored and skilled, and many mourned his passing.”

XXIV

Thunderbolt of the North

Battle is expected
For the wise sea-king.
The brave one will meet
The army of Trondelag
In a duel of spear-points.
God will decree which king
Will deprive the other of life and lands.
Svein cares not for broken oaths.

Thorleik Fagri

Thorir and his men had hidden themselves in a nearby wood when they heard trumpets blaring from the king's camp, heralding the death of Magnus. They soon heard voices, too, close by – men searching the forest. When arrows began flicking past them, Thorir and his men took cover.

"I assume these gentle tidings come from King Harald," Thorir told them, "whether he sent them himself or sent men to deliver them. He must have noticed our escape and guessed we would hide here." He and his men ducked and ran, to seek sanctuary with the Danes.

Nor was there any longer a place in Norway for Thorir's (and Magnus's) mother, the former concubine and slave girl Alfhild. She took shelter with a Danish chieftain by the name of Thorkell Geysa. With her gone, Magnus was survived only by his daughter Ragnhild, who was still just a child, and even when full grown would be nothing more than marital bait for an ally in the

great game to come.

Harald soon learned, however, that Magnus's family was not his only problem. With his claim to the Norwegian crown secured, and intending to lay claim to the Danish crown as well, he called a *thing* meeting at nearby Vebjorg (modern Viborg) in northern Jutland, one of Denmark's oldest cities, to confirm himself as King of the Danes. After that he and the united Danish-Norwegian army would run Svein back to Sweden once and for all, or better yet catch him and kill him.

But old Einar Thambarskelfir was not having it. He made a speech to the effect that his first duty was to take Magnus's body home to rest, rather than war on foreign kings for their land and goods (clearly including Svein among foreign kings). He declared it better to follow Magnus, dead, than any other king alive.

That in itself was treasonous enough that Harald might have slain a lesser man for it. Einar, though, was one of the most powerful chieftains in Norway – next to Harald, probably *the* most powerful, with his own retinue of fighting men and the sympathies of many of the rest – powerful enough that he had no need to flee, as had Thorir and Alfhild, from Harald's wrath. Einar was married to a daughter of Hakon Sigurdsson, another of the earls of Lade and, as vassal of Harald Bluetooth, Norway's *de facto* ruler until murdered in 995. Together, Einar, his wife and their son Eindridi represented the country's old aristocratic dynasty, which Harald's brother Olaf had overthrown. Einar, along with Kalf Arnason, had fetched back Olaf's son Magnus from Norway and acclaimed him as king because the boy had been controllable. Harald was not. It was only a matter of time before matters between him and Einar came to a head.

But for Harald to go against Einar meant sundering Norway into factions, and possibly war. Einar had the money, the heritage and the manpower to reclaim the throne his forefathers had lost. If, in a fight, Harald was vanquished (and by that, meaning he was killed), his nobles would not remain unified except behind his own male heir. As it was, Harald's wife and daughters would all be divided up among the conquerors, and with them his empire and his legacy.

"King Harald decided," wrote Snorri, "that it would be best for him to return home to Norway, assert his right to rule, and then raise an army loyal to him alone." Denmark was not going anywhere. Once firmly sitting upon

the Norwegian throne, Harald could always return south to finish up with Svein.

Magnus's body, in all his best trappings, was laid out on a bier aboard the *Visund* and taken north to Trondheim. Bells tolled across the city as the late king's body was interred next to that of his father Olaf. "Of all kings he was the most popular," eulogizes the *Heimskringla*, "admired equally by friends and foes."

Svein was in his camp by the Helgea (Holy) River in Scania, preparing for yet another escape to Sweden, when word came that Magnus had died and the Norwegians had abandoned their invasion. He immediately unpacked his bags: "Before God, I swear that while I still live I will never again flee Denmark."

Thorir and his men arrived that fall, and by Christmas Thorkell Geysa delivered Alfhild as well. Svein welcomed the fugitives out of respect for his fallen foe Magnus, and enmity for King Harald. Alas, Thorir soon died, apparently of grief over his brother, and Alfhild, left without sons to remember her, faded into history.

Regardless, Svein raised a fresh army, and that winter returned to Jutland. At Viborg, where Harald had hoped to have himself proclaimed King of the Danes, the Danes instead acclaimed Svein. Thorkell Geysa, as a leader among the chieftains (his epithet translates as "Big Mouth"), personally invested Svein with the title. For some reason everyone thought things would be different this time, as though Harald was weaker without Magnus. In celebration Thorkell's daughters went so far as to make cheeses in the shape of anchors, telling each other that they were Norwegian anchors. (In translation the humor gets a bit lost. The punchline had something to do with the penetrative purpose and phallic shape of a long-shanked, twin-fluked anchor – at least, as rendered in cheese – implying Norwegian flaccidity.)

Harald spent the winter traveling around Norway, from Oslo in the south – then just a minor village called Anslo – to Nidaros in the north, calling *thing* meetings, demanding loyalty and whipping up hatred for the Danes. "We Norwegians should never forget how we were made to suffer the tyranny and belligerence of the Danes when they held sway over Norway in the days of Svein, Alfifa's son," he reminded everyone, ignoring the fact that he had been in Rus and Byzantium then, "and we should take vengeance if we get the chance. Clearly you hate them. Your deeds should match your hate."

Harald could bank on his royal blood to gather Norwegians to him. His Rus queen, however, presented something of an impediment. Elisif might still give Harald a son, but he would be half Rus, and represent a union not of Scandinavians, but of Norway and Kiev. In the event of a power struggle with Einar and his clan, her family and their support were very far away. What Harald needed was a son, preferably one of pure Norwegian blood, in whose name his warlords could unite. And for that, he needed another wife, a Norwegian wife, from a powerful, noble family.

The earls of Lade were not the only such in Norway. The leader of the mission to retrieve Magnus from Rus, Kalf Arnason, was still in exile in the Orkneys, but his brothers had all fought for Olaf at Stiklestad, remained loyal to Magnus and were still loyal to Harald. Finn Arnason had married Bergljot, daughter of Harald's brother Halfdan. Another Arnason brother, Thorberg, had a daughter, Thora, who caught the eye of the king. In 1048 she was twenty-three, the same age as Elisif and a good ten years younger than Harald. No image, or even description, of her survives. She rates only a few lines in the *Heimskringla* and *Flateyjarbok*, and none at all in the *Morkinskinna*. Yet that year, without divorcing Elisif or even downgrading her status as queen, the king took Thora Thorbergsdottir as his second wife.

Polygamy was hardly unheard of in Scandinavia. Of the Swedes, Adam of Bremen would write, "A man of means might have two or three or more wives at once, rich men and princes as many as they like. And they regard the sons of such wives as legitimate, too."

Among the Nordic, Germanic peoples, however, there were different degrees of marriage. A primary wife's union was less a love match than a legal arrangement between families; hers paid a dowry and transferred her guardianship to her husband, who gave her rights of property and inheritance. A secondary or handfast wife – in Old Norse, an *elga*, "rival wife" – had no such rights, but enjoyed other benefits. She married more by choice (besides love, it was a way for lower-class women to enter the upper class), any children from the union were considered hers before her husband's, and she had equal right to seek divorce. The church frowned upon these secondary marriages, but had a legal, Latin term for it: *more danico*, "in the Danish manner." (To Rome, apparently, all Norse were Danes.) In England the Anglo-Saxons, who also took second wives, referred to a handfast as a "Danish wife." There was a third kind of match, concubinage, which was not

considered marriage at all. Children mothered by a *frilla*, a concubine or mistress, were illegitimate unless acknowledged by the father. Alfhild, mother of Magnus the Good, was not a wife but a concubine, yet her son, acknowledged by Olaf, inherited his kingdom by blood (though in reality only by the strength of Kalf and Einar and their *thegns*).

Thora would never become Queen of Norway, but Snorri referred to her union with Harald as a marriage, which made her more than a concubine. Whether the match was arranged, or was in accordance with her wishes, is unrecorded and perhaps even immaterial if she agreed on her family's behalf. From Harald's perspective, and no doubt that of the Arnasons (except Kalf), their marriage cemented Thora's family to his, all the more if she bore him children, and even more if she bore him a son. Harald seems to have spent the early months of 1048 working on just that.

Meanwhile the cheese-anchor joke made by the daughters of Thorkell Geysa in Viborg had made its way north to Harald's ear. Having levied a fresh army and ships, he advised his men that he was determined to set his own anchor in Danish soil. They made good his threat. That summer they ransacked Jutland down to Godnardfjord (modern Rander Fjord on the east coast). Thjodolf the skald vowed, "Next year our cold anchor will bite on warmer shores and we'll sink the hook even deeper."

They made a special point of targeting Thorkell's estate at Hornslet, on Jutland's southeast coast. When their ships hit the beach, Harald told his men, "Not far from here can be found the residence of Thorkell Geysa, the man who gave Svein the royal title and became our greatest enemy. He is the wealthiest man in this country, and it seems only fitting for him to know that the Norwegians have arrived. His daughters can find out whether our anchors are made of cheese or whether they turn out to be a little firmer. Attack boldly, because we will collect more riches here in this one place than all over Jutland."

Thorkell's sentries saw them coming. One accused Dotta Thorkellsdottir, "You had your fun mocking King Harald. You said he would never come to Denmark."

Dotta conceded, "That was yesterday."

Thorkell was not home, but his family took refuge in his hall. The

Norwegians set it afire. Coughing on smoke and facing immolation, the women cried for mercy. Harald told his men his own anchor joke: “Though Geysa’s daughters deserve to burn inside the house here, I think we can see whether Norwegian flukes can fasten on Danish stocks.”

As the farmstead burned to the ground, Thorkell’s daughters were led away in chains. The sagas do not mention rape – they rarely do, since whether sex was consensual or not was of little concern to Norsemen, who referred to it with words like *hertaka*, to capture, and *hernema*, to occupy – but as the women were marched aboard the Norwegian longships an anonymous skald wrote his own punchline:

> The girls of Denmark
> Carved useless anchors
> From their soft cheeses,
> Angering Norway’s king.
> Today these same maidens
> See strong iron anchors
> Holding his dragon ships,
> And none are laughing now.

On his return Thorkell Geysa met with Harald under truce, pleading for forgiveness and offering to pay ransom for his daughters and to compensate for the wrongs done the king. Harald said, “It does not strike me as worthy of royalty to slay your daughters for their contempt, even though they throroughly deserve it. But because you surrendered, I will grant you a chance to make things right. You may purchase the return of your daughters, but it will be expensive. In this I will have the last laugh.”

The ransom amount is unknown, but Thorkell’s daughters survived. Many Danes did not. One skald wrote, “My lord gave the eagles Danish blood to drink and laid a yule-feast for the ravens by Thjolarnes [a village near Viborg, which notably no longer exists]. Across the land eagles perched on the dead, and the wolf ate its fill of the flesh of the Jutes. I hope it truly enjoyed that.”

Blood and slaughter was always a popular topic for the poets, but in this case it obscured the bigger picture. The Norwegians sailed home that autumn, leaving death and destruction in their wake, but Harald failed in his greater

goal of bringing Svein to battle.

On the home front he was more successful. Late in 1048, possibly 1049, Harald's new wife Thora was delivered of a son. They named him Magnus.

There is no record of Elisaveta's reaction. Her daughters Maria and Ingigerd were both younger than five years old. Magnus's daughter Ragnhild could not have been much older. As women – as princesses – they were already more likely to become queens of other men's kingdoms, rather than inheriting Harald's. Nor was Elisaveta's position as queen under threat. Though she had not become pregnant again, as shall be seen, Harald had not forsaken her bed.

Einar Thambarskelfir and his son Eindridi, on the other hand, must have heard the news with some trepidation. A king with a son to carry on his legacy is less afraid to die, and therefore all the more dangerous, and the birth of princes has often been an excuse for war. The heirs of Lade, however, did not rock the Norwegian boat. Harald had been king for two years without trampling on their rights. He had no reason to do so now, as long as they gave him no excuse.

For the time being, then, Harald could look south again. Someday his newborn son would rule as Magnus II. It was time to secure his Danish realm.

"The king now returned south to Denmark to raid, inflicting great destruction upon the Danes," reports the *Morkinskinna*. "All summer he plundered, but whenever they could the Danish warrors fled before him. No longer did they taunt the Norwegians and goad them to anger, feeling they had suffered enough of that already."

Svein made loud noises about invading Norway in much the same manner, though he did nothing about it. By that winter matters had reached the point that his hard-pressed people demanded a meeting with Harald, if only to arrange a set-piece battle to bring about an end to the conflict one way or the other. Envoys were sent to Norway. "They requested that Harald bring his army down from the north, while King Svein came up from the south, and that they should meet at the Gautelf to fight it out and settle their quarrel over

the land."

Today the Gautelf (modern Gota alv, "River of the Geats") runs through southwestern Sweden, emptying into the Kattegat. Back then it was middle ground between the Danes and the Norwegians.

"That is a noble offer on the part of King Svein and the Danes," answered Harald. "You may give my reply to them, that I will meet them in battle."

By spring both sides had built ships and raised armies, and in the summer of 1050 Harald's fleet went south. When they arrived at the appointed place, however, Svein and his fleet were nowhere to be found.

Thjodolf commemorated the occasion in verse, as befitted a masterful skald, comparing the two kings to the gods Baldur and Njord and declaring in his roundabout, poetic way that Svein was a deceiver, but that Harald was good as his word, even unto death.

"True enough, skald," Harald told him, "King Svein has not kept his rendezvous with me. Perhaps the Danes think it more pleasant to herd pigs in the forest than give battle. Since they have not seen fit to meet us, we will go visit them and give them the usual beating, or this time a bit worse."

Sending home most of his bondmen – the farmers and serfs in his militia, generally not considered dependable fighters – he retained his hardcore troops and led them against Jutland again, laying waste to Thjod (modern Thy), the island that forms the northernmost part of the Danish mainland. He went so far south as to sack Aros (modern Aarhus) in central Jutland, one of the oldest cities in Denmark and the seat of a bishopric, for which the king of the Norwegians cared not one whit. He ordered the city's Church of the Holy Trinity burned to ashes. "King Harald exceeded all crazed tyrants in his brutality," recorded Adam of Bremen. "He destroyed many churches and tortured many people to death."

That, however, did not quench Harald's thirst for conquest. He announced, "I want the Danes to remember our visit forever, and never forget we dared to attack them harder than ever before. We have now looted more plunder than in any number of summers past, but now I want to go south, to Hedeby. It would be quite something to go that far to deal death and destruction."

Quite something indeed. Hedeby – in Old Norse *Heidabyr*, "heath town," for its surrounding moorlands – lay far down in Schleswig, the very southern neck of the Danish mainland. (So far south that today the site is actually in northern Germany.) It was tucked in the innermost end of the Schlei, a

narrow but navigable twenty-mile fjord cutting in from the east, the Baltic Sea. The *Haervejen*, the ancient Army Road or Oxen Road, the main route running down the Jutland Ridge from Viborg in the north down into Germany, passed about a half-mile to the west. Across that ran a connecting road some nine miles from Hedeby to Hollingstedt, a little port town on the Treene River, which ultimately flowed down to the North Sea and Atlantic Ocean.

At the center of this land–sea crossroad, Hedeby (like Constantinople, though on a vastly smaller scale) had become a literal middleman. Voyagers could take a shortcut across Jutland overland, without having to risk sailing up around the peninsula, subject to the depredations of the northern sea rovers. Goods converged from across Europe – Norwegian soapstone and whetstone, Swedish iron ore and copper, Rhenish glass and Slavic ceramics, furs and slaves (though the slave market was drying up under the influence of Christianity), wares from as far away as Byzantium and Greenland.

About a hundred years earlier, the Spanish Arab traveler and historian Ibrahim ibn Yaqub al-Tartushi – "from Tortosa" in Catalonia, Spain – had visited Hedeby and written:

> The town is poor in goods and wealth. People eat mostly fish, which are plentiful. Babies are tossed into the sea to save expenses. Women have the right to divorce, and do so whenever they are inclined to it. Eye make up is another oddity; when people wear it their beauty never fades, and is in fact increased in both men and women. However, I have never heard singing worse than that of the Schleswegians. It is a rumbling deep within their throats, like the growling of a dog, but even more beastly.

Whether or not the singing had improved, in the ensuing hundred years or so since al-Tartushi's visit, Hedeby had come up in the world. In its sheltered bay, Haddeby Noor, small boats could land on a soft, silty beach 300 yards across, and larger ships could moor to a wooden jetty, bearing all the riches of the North. Among sixty acres of wood-paved streets and wattle-and-daub, thatch-roofed houses, metalsmiths worked in iron, jewelers in bronze, bead-makers in glass and amber, and carvers in Lapland reindeer horn and Greenland walrus ivory. There were shoemakers, sailmakers and shipbuilders, armorers, moneychangers, whores, priests, merchants and wives and children – 1,000–1,500 people all told. Hedeby had succeeded prior trading centers like Kaupang in Norway, Birka in Sweden and Uppakra in Scania as the gateway to the North. According to the *Morkinskinna*, "Almost

all the glory and wealth of Denmark were to be found there…. For almost all the richest people of the land came there, as well as powerful men and their wives."

Hedeby was the pride of the Danes, the biggest and richest town in Scandinavia, which for Harald and his Norwegians made it the biggest target. It was also one of the best protected. Hedeby was the anchor point of the *Danevirke*, the Danish Works: a line of embankments, palisades and trenches akin, in Kievan Rus, to Yaroslav's Snake Ramparts. Together with the Treene and Schlei waterways, they effectively sealed off Jutland from the Frisians and Saxons to the south. Hedeby itself was enclosed by a deep moat and earthen wall, sixteen feet high and over half a mile around, topped with a wooden stockade, and the inland harbor was protected by a block chain across the narrows. In almost three centuries Hedeby had never been conquered.

Palisades. Moats. Block chains. All in all, nothing new to Harald. Like al-Tartushi, he viewed Hedeby with a more experienced, world-wise eye. Such defenses might impress uncultured Northmen, but not one who had served Constantinople.

Alas, the sagas give us no inkling of how Hedeby was laid low. No mention of a daring surprise attack or trick in order to open one of the gates, as Harald had employed against the Sicilians. No talk of a sudden blast of Greek fire against the palisade, as famed by the Burner of Bulgars. (For all his years in Byzantium, there's no evidence that Harald ever learned the secret formula of, or in his later career ever used, Greek fire.) No war galleys riding over the block chain, as in the escape from Constantinople. Yet somehow entry was accomplished. When the sagas revisit Hedeby, Harald and his Norwegians are already inside the walls. The town is doomed.

"They fell on the town like a tornado," records the *Morkinskinna*, "seizing vast and plentiful treasure."

Harald himself seemed surprised by the ease with which Hedeby was taken. "Even though the Danes opposed me as their king," he declared, "they do little to prevent their women and wealth from falling into my hands."

His men took everything of value, killed and raped at their whim and marched Hedeby's richest citizens away into captivity. "When they had

looted the town and taken everything they wanted," reports the *Morkinskinna*, "they burned it to the ground."

It was not enough to subjugate Hedeby. Harald's goal was to utterly destroy it, to eradicate it as a source of Danish wealth and power, to create a void in the marketplace that could be filled by Norwegian trade centers to the north. His men eagerly undertook the task. One of them recalled standing on the ramparts before dawn, looking out in satisfaction upon the flames gushing from the houses: "In fury, all Hedeby was laid waste with fire, and that, I believe, one can call a valorous feat."

Come sunrise the town was a smoldering ruin, from which it never fully recovered. Though excavations continue and a few replica huts have been erected on the site, today the place is largely a meadow. Cows graze where streets once ran. Trees, unable to take root in the soft soil, only grow on the raised embankment that once circled the town.

Hedeby was arguably a pinnacle of Norse culture. Had it survived, its influx of southern goods and influences might have become the foundation of a more civilized Scandinavia, akin to the more advanced feudal economies then rising to the south, based on markets and trade rather than murder and rape, slavery and robbery. Harald, the Hammer of Denmark, a man from an earlier, bloodier time, destroyed it, and to make matters worse he failed to raise anything in its place. He had founded Anslo, the modern city of Oslo, on the site of a large farm and the Church of St. Clement, just across the Skagerrak from Denmark in southern Norway, for such a purpose. But when Europe set off on the High Middle Ages, commercial and economic power would not spread north across Scandinavia, but to the south, among the German cities of the Hanseatic League. This fault can be laid to Harald.

In his poetic ode to Svein, the skald Thorleik Fagri ("Thorleik the Handsome") lamented that what had been done, was done without due cause, and that the year of 1050 "never should have happened."

"King Harald and his men now returned north with their treasure," recounts the *Morkinskinna*. "They had sixty large ships, heavy-laden with all the loot they had seized over the summer."

As the fleet rounded Thjod, the northernmost cape of Jutland, they beheld an immense army ashore: the Danes, a bit late to the party but still looking

for a fight. Svein himself called to Harald across the water, daring the King of Norway to do battle with him, “rather than to thieve people’s calves and kids [baby goats] and petty jewelry as you have done so far in Denmark.”

Harald did not rise to the bait. With his bondmen sent home, the Danish army vastly outnumbered his. “I think most people realize that we have done more than squabble with mere farmers,” he called back. “However, to land here at your request and seek battle with the entire Danish army is not my wish, seeing as I command so few troops at the moment. Yet I will meet you in a battle at sea if that is your wish, even though you Danes have double our numbers.”

With that he bid landlocked Svein farewell and raised sail for home. The wind proved uncooperative, though, and the Norwegian fleet soon found itself lying over for the night off Hlesey (modern Laeso), the largest island in the Kattegat, about a dozen miles off the northeast coast of Jutland. Said to have been the feasting-place of the legendary Aesir, where the god Thor was assaulted by warrior women who battered his ship, in Harald’s day it was better known for salt – today taken for granted, but in ancient times a hard-sought and valuable commodity. In summers Hlesey received so little rain it was practically a desert, and since its groundwater was saline, ponds and streams dried into large salt pans.

Harald and his men were not so concerned with Hlesey’s salt as with the cover it provided. When dawn broke, fog blanketed the island, but out to sea something glittered like fire in the sun.

“Take down the ship-tents as quickly as possible,” Harald ordered, “man the oars and head north. I am quite certain that an army is after us.”

The fog lay thick around Hlesey, but out on the Kattegat the sun was shining – shining on the gold work adorning dragon ships. King Svein had summoned his fleet. The Danes were upon them.

XXV

Dragon Ships

Svein, whose luck was always on his side,
Invited the Norwegians to bloody their shields ashore.
But clever Harald said he preferred to fight ship to ship,
Because the scheming Dane was all-powerful on land.

Thjodolf Arnorsson

Svein had called Harald's bluff. The Norwegians had amply demonstrated their ability to devastate helpless farms and villages, but now they faced an army, larger than theirs, spoiling for a fight and willing to give it to them on land or at sea.

Harald was brave in battle, but not to the point of suicide. Better to face the Danes when the odds were more favorable. He ordered his fleet to escape north, through the Kattegat and the Skagerrak, to the open sea.

Given a good wind, Norse longships were faster under sail than being rowed, but the existence of the fog bank over Hlesey indicates there was no wind that morning. Raised sails would catch nothing more than fire arrows. Harald's men stowed theirs, and ran out oars. Stroking out from under the fog, the Norwegian fleet broke cover and fled for home.

The Danes spotted them and came pulling hard after them. Svein called out to his men, "Remember what they have taken from you and the humiliating loss of life and wealth we must avenge. Many of you here hope to recover your noble women and lost treasure. You will get no better chance, and we will be remembered forever if, in this moment, we pay them back for the

years of shame they have wrought on us."

His men put their backs into their oars. The chase was on.

Svein's longships, built of Danish oak rather than Norwegian pine, were sturdier than Harald's but, being designed for gentle Jutland shores and Baltic waves rather than rough fjords and stormy North Atlantic crossings, they were narrower, drew less water and were faster. Harald's longships were waterlogged and burdened with treasure and captives, and the farmers still with the fleet sailed tubby, slow cargo craft. Harald himself was bringing up the rear in one of the biggest Norwegian vessels, a *drakkar* or dragon ship (though unnamed in the sagas, probably the *Visund* that had once belonged to Magnus). Viking longships might typically run 100 feet long and twenty feet across the beam, displacing 100 tons and driven by up to fifty oars. The *drakkar*, of which few examples have survived, is thought to have ranged up to 160 feet and twenty-five feet across, but with only about seventy oars – an increase in size of over two and a half times, but in power of only about fifty percent. *Drakkars* were impressive, but slow. From the stern of his, Harald could see the Danes closing the distance. The Norwegians would never outrun them.

"We are going to have to figure out an escape, because as things are going we will not," he told his men. "We will put rafts overboard bearing plunder and treasure, for while this calm lasts the current will carry it toward them. I'll wager the Danes will change course to pick up the loot as soon as they see it floating on the water."

Pulling up their deck planking, his men set the rafts in the water, draped with clothing and jewelry, and let them trail away aft. Harald was right. As soon as the Danes in the lead longships spotted the rafts, they turned and backed water with their oars to stop to pick up the booty.

Svein was furious. "It will be a great shame, considering how many men we have, if we do not beat the Norwegians today," he derided his men. "You seem to have forgotten all their crimes which beg for punishment."

Shamed, they returned to their oars and were soon back in pursuit. The Norwegians had pulled a little way ahead, but soon Harald's great *drakkar* and the cargo craft were falling back into their enemy's grasp.

"We must lighten ship," he ordered. "Overboard with the heaviest cargo – the malt and wheat. Pour out the ale."

You know things are serious when Vikings sacrifice their beer, but other

than gold and silver, grain and alcohol were probably their densest, heaviest cargo. Their ships gained a little speed, but not enough to pull away from their pursuers. And the Danes were not tempted to stop to pick up mere barrels.

Harald made a merciless decision. He ordered his men, “Next over the side will be our prisoners, the friends and families of the Danes.”

The Norwegians hadn’t wasted their time kidnapping Hedeby’s lowly serfs and slaves. Their prisoners were the cream of the city – rich merchants, mid-level nobles and their wives, and the wives and children of Svein’s warriors, whom the Danes would gladly pay to see returned. Harald was giving up a fortune in ransom money. His men would have to be satisfied with tossing pompous old aristocrats and shrieking ladies over the rail in all their finery, leaving them to cling, sputtering, to the floating planks and barrels.

In the summer, the surface waters of the Kattegat only reach about 60°F (15°C) – not cold enough to kill swimmers in minutes, but cold enough to kill them in a few hours. If Svein’s men continued their pursuit and fought a battle with the Norwegians before returning, they would find only dead bodies in the water.

“When the Danes came upon the people struggling in the water and recognized their wives and friends,” reports the *Morkinskinna*, “they veered toward them to rescue them at any cost.” The Danish fleet halted, the longships scattered to pick up survivors, and the Norwegian fleet – most of it, anyway – escaped to the north.

Svein stood on deck, watching the dripping survivors hauled aboard, and the ships of his enemy receding into the distance. “I can understand why you stopped for these helpless people,” he told his men, “but you would have reaped a greater reward if you had followed through with our attack. If King Harald and I had met today, the Norwegians would have learned how the Danes can fight. Now that he has escaped, we are going to suffer this war for a long time.”

Not all was lost. On their return to Hlesey the Danes came across seven Norwegian cargo ships which for some reason – possibly, in the fog bank, their crews had not heard the order to get under way, or had simply become lost – had not taken part in the escape. They were manned by nothing more than farmers and serfs, part of Harald’s levy force, with no particular grudge against Svein. Far from putting up a fight, they quite willingly laid down their

weapons, pleaded for their lives and offered payment in order that they be spared.

Svein's Danes were in no mood to show mercy to Norwegians. They urged him to kill the prisoners outright, but Svein showed himself to be a different king than Harald: "It does not seem kingly for me to have so little luck in battle and yet kill men who beg for mercy. Today I choose to be kingly."

He not only granted the prisoners their lives, but he also let them go without exacting ransom (though presumably the Danes kept any cargo taken from Hedeby). Svein's goodness, and Harald's undignified retreat, were so memorable that Thorleik Fagri memorialized them in verse, which would eventually reach Harald's ear as surely as had the cheese jokes of Dotta Thorkellsdottir. The Norwegian's king's dispute with Svein of Denmark remained unsettled, and as Svein himself had foreseen, while the two kings still lived they would remain at odds.

"King Harald returned to Norway," recounts the *Morkinskinna*, "saying that he hoped it would not be long before he met up with King Svein and exacted vengeance." That was brave talk from a king who, having finally come face to face with his enemy, had tucked tail and fled. A Viking overlord had to be the meanest wolf in the pack, but Harald had shown that he could be made to run. He was bound to face a challenge at home – unless, that is, he came down even harder on his own people.

XXVI

Hard Ruler

King Harald's subjects
Must show obeisance
By standing up or sitting down
However the king commands.
Everyone humbly
Bows down before this warrior.
The king demands submission
To every royal order.

Thjodolf Arnorsson

"King Harald was an absolute monarch," admitted Snorri, "and the more secure he felt on the throne, the more imperious he became. It got to the point that hardly anyone dared to differ with him, or advise anything other than what the king wished."

In those days Scandinavian rulers often traveled around their realms with their entire courts and retinues, living off their nobles' largesse and hospitality. Besides keeping the royals in their accustomed comforts, it had the added benefit of bleeding powerful lords of surplus supplies and riches, almost as a form of taxation.

One autumn Harald journeyed with a hundred men to Torgar, today's Bronnoysund, about 150 miles up the coast from Nidaros. There he imposed himself on a local lenderman named Aslak, who was none too happy to play host, and even less happy when Harald accused him of hiding a son from the

king’s service – in modern terms, helping him dodge the draft. Aslak denied it, but when the king threatened to outstay his welcome until Aslak was eaten out of house and home – that, or he produced his son, or his son’s body – he was forced to send for him.

The lad, named Heming, was full grown. In fact, the sagas agree there was no “manlier champion or one better made in every way.” Presumably he was long-legged; his name translates as “rear leg” or “shank,” and at the very sight of him the king remarked, “I would not like to see the hide of which you are one of the shanks.”

Historians believe Heming is probably a fictional character, as some aspects of his tale are fantastic, and some retold of other heroes from Iceland, Denmark and Norway. Yet so many actual people appear and are quoted in his *thattr*, a kind of mini-saga written about him, that it is hard to believe it has no basis in fact.

Harald, the aging champion, immediately set out to dominate this strapping youth, challenging him to a series of contests. Heming claimed to be best at skiing (some translations say snow-shoeing), so the king chose archery and spear-throwing. Heming beat him at both. When it came to swimming, Harald called on his old friend Halldor Snorrason to take his place, but Halldor took one look at Heming and declined: “Out-swimming him would take a better man than I.”

So Harald called on Thora’s brother, Nikulas Thorbergsson. Heming not only bested him, but when Nikulas tired and almost drowned, Heming also rescued him and pulled him back to shore. When Harald asked Nikulas how it went, the latter said, “I wouldn’t be talking to you now if Heming had not treated me better than you have.”

Now Harald challenged Heming himself, to a trial of ducking. Aslak warned his son to flee, that the king was angered and wanted his life.

“Eagles must claw each other face to face,” answered the son. “But the man with God on his side cannot be sunk. If it is the king’s wish to kill me, let him try.”

Son and king wrestled in the water until both went under. Only the king came back up.

“He was so angry that no one dared speak to him,” recorded the chroniclers, “no one saw Heming and everyone thought he was dead, but no one wanted to ask.”

It was not a happy night in Aslak's hall. The king was sullen with anger and the lord of the house struck with grief, until suddenly Heming appeared, none the worse for wear, to return the king's knife and belt, which he had taken in the fight.

The next day, over Aslak's protests, Harald took Heming aboard his ship, across the fjord to the foot of a mountain.[1] "Now," Harald told Heming, "amuse us with your skiing."

Heming objected that the conditions were not exactly optimum – little snow, lots of ice and bare rock. Harald scoffed, "It would be no test of skill if everything was perfect."

Seeing the way things were going, Heming strapped on his skis and proceeded to put on a display of medieval carving and freestyling and pre-modern Nordic cross-country that astounded everyone watching… except one.

"Now climb to the top of the mountain and ski down," Harald told him, "and stop at the cliff edge, if you can."

"If you want to kill me," Heming said, "there is no reason to be so clever about it."

"If you do not do as I say," replied Harald, "then you will certainly be killed."

Heming chose likely death over certain death. Aslak offered Harald everything he had to spare his son's life, but for Harald the matter was no longer about money.

As Heming prepared for his run, one of the king's Icelanders, Odd Ofeigsson, took him aside. "This is a bad end for a good man," he said, but for good luck tied on him a cloth said to have been worn by St. Stephen, Christianity's first martyr, as a blindfold when he was stoned to death.

While the king and his men watched from the cliff edge, Heming climbed to the top of the mountain, donned his skis, and came schussing back down at breakneck speed. He tried to stop at the cliff top, and almost did, by grabbing Harald's cloak. Nikulas Thorbergsson held on to the king, and Harald bent at the waist. The cloak was stripped over his head. Heming went off the cliff.

"Now the living and the dead go their separate ways," said the king.

Odd Ofeigsson said aloud that if both Heming and Harald had fallen, one would have gone to heaven and the other to hell. For that Harald ordered his

men to throw Odd off the cliff as well, but now even Halldor Snorrason intervened, declaring that if one Icelander was to die that day, all of them would. With his Icelanders and Norwegians facing off, Harald backed down, but he banished Odd back to Iceland. (Another story concerning Odd has him banished for smuggling, but the outcome was the same.)

Feelings between Halldor and the king did not improve. Having come all the way from Constantinople with Harald, Halldor was soon homesick for Iceland. He wanted to visit his father, Snorri Godi ("Snorri the Chieftain"), but owning little more than the clothes on his back, he would return with nothing to show for his years in the south except the lurid scar on his face.

"That is poor reward for years of service and uncounted dangers," Harald admitted. "I will give you a longship full of cargo so your father will see you have done well in my service."

"That summer Halldor sailed to Iceland and spent the winter with his father," records the *Morkinskinna*, though this would seem to be in error, because Snorri Godi had died, probably in 1031, not long after Halldor departed for Byzantium. It may be a mistranslation, and Halldor merely spent the winter with his family, only just then learning of his father's death. "The next summer he returned to Harald's service, but it is said that Halldor was no longer so devoted to the king."

"Halldor spoke little," recounted Snorri, "he was curt and forthright, surly and stubborn. The king did not need this, as he had plenty of men in his service who were both highborn and dedicated to him." Halldor, it seems, was no longer satisfied to serve at Harald's whim. For one thing, he was insulted to take Harald's silver, which even the *Morkinskinna* admits the king had debased with copper, derisively called "Harald's coin." Harald in turn was insulted that Halldor held out for pure silver. It reached the point that they even argued about how to captain the king's longship – again, likely the *Visund* – especially after Harald overrode Halldor's orders to their steersman, resulting in the ship tearing out its bottom on rocks. Though it was repaired, Halldor demanded a ship of his own. To accommodate him, Harald had to confiscate one from another of his chieftains, who promptly stole it back from Halldor. The king had to assemble a small fleet to get it back. Finally, to settle the feud, Harald returned the ship to its owner and paid Halldor for it,

but shorted him on the full amount by half a mark of gold.

That was the last straw. Come spring Halldor determined to return to Iceland and not come back. With Harald still finding excuses to not pay the leftover half-mark, he bought a ship anyway and made it ready off Brattaeyrr at the mouth of the Nid River (modern Brattora Island off the Nidelva River, which runs through Trondheim). That night, taking a few men with him, he went into town, entered the royal hall and, going up the steps alone with sword drawn, broke into the room where Harald and Elisaveta slept. “It is Halldor,” he announced, “ready to raise sail, with the wind in my favor. The time has come for you to pay your debt.”

Harald, for once caught off guard, stalled. “That cannot be done on the spur of the moment. I will pay you tomorrow.”

“You will pay it now,” Halldor said, “for I am not leaving with this business undone. I know your temper too well, and I know just how you will take my dunning you. Say what you will, I will not trust you. There is little chance that I will have the advantage if we ever meet again, so I will make the most of it now. The queen is wearing an armlet of about the right size. Give it to me.”

“We will have scales brought in and weigh it,” Harald said.

“Do not bother. I will have it as my payment. You are not going to trick me this time. Hand it over now.”

Elisaveta (the *Morkinskinna* does not refer to her by name, but simply as the queen; Thora was his consort) cried to Harald, “Do you not see? He is standing over you with murder in his heart.”

She tore the armlet off and gave it to Halldor, who thanked her, bid them both goodbye, and dashed back down the steps. He and his men ran for their ship. By the time they raised anchor and cast off, trumpets were waking the town and three longships set out in pursuit, but Halldor’s ship outran them. The Icelander made it home in one piece.

Years later, Harald sent word that he would be happy to have Halldor back again, and promised to raise him above all other men save the nobles of the land. Halldor did not fall for it: “If I return to Norway he means to hang me from the highest gallows.”

The old friends never saw each other again. Halldor, though, lived a long life as a farmer in Iceland. He took a wife, Thordis Thorvaldsdottir, who bore him two daughters and two sons. He took quite apparent pride in recounting

tales of his youthful adventures with Harald, King of Norway. At least one Icelandic skald returned to the old country to, not without some misgivings, recite the stories for the king, only to find that Harald happily approved of Halldor's version of events. Halldor's children, and their children, passed the tales along as well, down the line until finally his descendant Snorri Sturluson decided to set them on paper in the *Heimskringla.*

With Ulf Ospaksson it was different. Over the years he became the king's most trusted man, to the point that Harald titled him *stallari* (marshal) and arranged for him to be married to his consort Thora's sister Jorunn Thorbergsdottir, thereby making Ulf part of the royal family, and the Arnason clan as well.

This was wise strategy, for Norway was dividing into two armed camps. On one side was Harald and the Arnasons (minus Kalf, still in the Orkneys). On the other was Einar Thambarskelfir, his son Eindridi and the old aristocracy descended from *Jarl* Hakon, including Hakon's grandsons *Jarl* Orm Eilifsson and Hakon Ivarsson. Their power bloc was such that Einar was unafraid to speak up for the landowners around Trondheim when Harald ruled too harshly over them, which happened with increasing frequency. When a chest of buried treasure was unearthed, Harald claimed it for the crown, despite the fact that runes on the box indicated it had been *Jarl* Hakon's, and the contents rightfully belonged to his descendants, including Einar, who laid claim to it, daring Harald to oppose him.

The king said, "You are truly powerful, Einar, if you think to rule despite the fact that I am king."

"Not at all," replied Einar. "You may be the king, but I will not suffer lawbreakers."

The matter was left unsettled, but after that Einar never came into town without an armed escort, said by the chroniclers to number no fewer than 500 men – about the same number which Harald had led to Constantinople in the old days. The king, looking down on this procession from his royal hall, is said to have muttered, "This lord expects to sit on the throne. Few *jarls* maintain so many liege men at their heels."

Matters came to a head when one of Einar's men, accused of thievery, was dragged into court. Before Harald could pronounce judgment, Einar and his

housecarls marched in and took the man out by force. Such effrontery could not be allowed to stand. “This sword-waver will run me out of my own country,” Harald told his men, “unless Einar kisses the thin mouth of the axe.”

The king allowed mutual friends to intercede and agreed to admit Einar into his hall to talk things over. Harald left his men in the courtyard outside, and when Einar arrived he did likewise, leaving even his son Eindridi with them so as not to provoke the king. As soon as he entered the darkened royal chamber alone, however, he was set upon by Harald and a few picked *thegns*. Einar managed to put the point of his spear through the king’s mail coat, but the wound was minor and the *jarl* was quickly cut down. Eindridi heard the commotion, rushed in, and was likewise assaulted. He sneered at his attackers, “I feel the bite of the king’s dogs,” before dying alongside his father. In the courtyard, Einar’s men – leaderless, surrounded by Harald’s warriors – did nothing while the king went down to his ship and sailed away.

“After Einar’s death,” wrote Snorri, “King Harald was so despised for his murder that only the need of a leader to raise their flag kept the landed men and farmers from rebelling against him.”

The closest thing remaining to a leader among the lendermen was Hakon Ivarsson. He had the blood of *Jarl* Hakon on his mother’s side, and though he had no title, even as a young man he had already made a name for himself in successful raids. Renowned for his courage, strength and deeds, he was held in high regard by all, to the point that, like Harald, a saga was written about him, though most of it has since been lost. Hakon considered it his duty to avenge his kinsmen, and furthermore had the support of the landowners around Nidaros. Things in Norway were shaping up almost as they had prior to the battle of Stiklestad.

As Olaf had then, Harald now turned to the Arnason clan for support. Specifically, Finn Arnason, uncle of his consort Thora and, in Kalf’s absence, the head of her family. Finn had fought at Olaf’s side at Stiklestad. Since then he had gone on numerous raids with Hakon, and *Jarl* Orm was his son-in-law. When Harald told him what had happened, Finn said, “What a perpetual villain you are! You commit one crime after another, and then you are so troubled that you do not know what to do.”

But Harald just laughed. He knew perfectly well what to do. “I am sending you to Nidaros now, kinsman, to make peace with the farmers. And if not, then go to the Opplands and make peace with Hakon Ivarrsson so he does not lead them against me.”

Finn objected that he was more likely to be murdered himself. Harald promised him any favor in return. Finn said, “Grant my brother Kalf peace and safe return from the Orkneys, and reinstate him with all the property and title and power he had before he left.”

To this Harald agreed. They shook hands on it, before witnesses. Finn asked what he could offer Hakon to buy his loyalty.

The king said, “Anything short of the kingdom itself.”

With eighty men as an escort, Finn journeyed to Nidaros. At a *thing* meeting he gave a long speech, urging the landowners to put aside their hate, reminding them of how badly things had gone after they had driven Olaf from Norway. They sent for Hakon, agreeing to follow his lead.

Meanwhile Finn went to see *Jarl* Orm and sway his opinion. By the time Hakon arrived, both were ready to persuade him that to go against Harald, even with the support of the townsmen, was likely to mean defeat, with Hakon’s life and property both forfeit, and even victory would stain his name and honor as a traitorous rebel. But Hakon had his own price for peace.

“I will make peace with King Harald,” he said, “if he gives to me in marriage his kinswoman Ragnhild, King Magnus Olafsson’s daughter, and a dowry according to her choice, as befits a woman of her standing.”

Ragnhild was by now about nineteen, “the fairest and wisest of women.” (In the sagas, just as all men are bigger and stronger than all others, all women are the fairest in the land.) A princess despite her lowborn mother, she was a prize worthy of a king.

Anything short of the realm, Harald had said. Finn agreed. Without Hakon to lead it, the rebellion sputtered out. When Hakon went to see Harald about claiming his reward, the king assured him he fully intended to hold up his end of the bargain, but advised him to approach Ragnhild first: “Not even you can hope to win Ragnhild’s hand without her consent.”

Here the sagas diverge a bit on the sequence of events. According to the *Heimskringla*, Hakon put his suit to Ragnhild personally. She reminded him that she was the daughter of a king, who would not have married her to anyone less than another king, and for herself she would not have a man

without a title, “no matter how handsome and accomplished you are.”

According to the *Morkinskinna*, it was Harald who sounded her out on Hakon’s behalf, and when she objected over Hakon’s low birth, agreed to eventually name him a *jarl* as part of her dowry. Though Ragnhild doubted the king’s sincerity – she clearly knew Harald better than most – she agreed.

In both versions, the upshot was that Harald went back on his word. The king had already made his deal with Hakon, and a jarldom was not part of it. Norway already had a *jarl*, Orm. One per kingdom had been enough for both Olaf and Magnus, and one was enough for Harald. He refused to deprive Orm of his rank, nor would he name Hakon as a second *jarl*, even for Ragnhild’s sake.

Hakon protested, “It is not right that she is disgraced because of me. A good king keeps his word.”

Harald told him to his face, “The truth is, Hakon, I have no need to hide it from you. You will have no jarldom.”

Whether Ragnhild and Hakon went unwed, or carried out their marriage based on a lie, Hakon could see that he had been, if not tricked, outmaneuvered. According to his own saga, he resolved to leave Norway. Ragnhild, who despite her misgivings about Hakon’s low birth obviously had feelings for him, advised him to seek out King Svein in Denmark. Leaving her behind, Hakon followed her advice and entered into Danish service.

Finn, who had made the agreement with Hakon in the first place, was no less offended. He had staked his honor and pledged his word as well to the farmers and townsmen in the Trondelag, who were now leaderless again. He demanded that Harald at least adhere to their own agreement, which Harald did. Finn sent word to his brother Kalf in the Orkneys that it was safe to return home. Kalf came to Harald and pledged himself to the king as he had pledged himself to Magnus. Harald restored to him all the properties and income he had enjoyed in those days, and all was well.

In the summer of 1051, Kalf accompanied Harald on his annual expedition to Denmark. When they came upon the island of Fyn they beheld a large army awaiting them ashore. Seeking to bring the Danes to battle, Harald ordered Kalf to land first, to occupy the enemy until the full Norwegian army could disembark and come to his support, and so it was done. Kalf’s small

force engaged with the Danes. Harald's longships hit the beach unopposed. He arranged his men in battle array and marched them inland to see how Kalf was faring.

Kalf was dead, and most of his men with him. The Danes fled before Harald, who pursued them inland, killing and looting as he pleased, leaving Kalf's body to be taken down to the ships for the journey home.

When Finn learned of this, he realized the king had played him for a fool, using him to lure Kalf back home in order to send him to certain death. He was among the last to have figured this out. "When everyone heard," recounted Snorri, "many felt Finn had been very foolish to have ever trusted King Harald, considering how unforgiving the king could be over lesser offenses than Kalf's."

For his part Harald would neither confirm nor deny the accusations, but was so pleased with the outcome that he composed a verse for the occasion:

> Now I have caused the deaths
> Of altogether eleven and two;
> I am compelled to fighting
> And remember all my killings.
> Trickery breeds malice,
> Which is best dealt out with cunning.
> Men say the tiny leek
> Needs little to grow strong.

Finn was so disgusted by the king's behavior that, like Hakon, he too left Norway, going south to join King Svein. Svein not only accepted his services, but named him *jarl* of Halland (in what is now southern Sweden), where he would serve as a buffer against Norwegian encroachment.

Harald, though, was less concerned with Denmark than with stamping out any lingering rebellion at home. He marched on the landowners of Oppland, of Romerike and Ringerike in southern Norway, burning their estates and halls until they were brought to heel. "The farmers, seeking a fight, ignored the king's law. They committed crimes unheard of," wrote the skald Thjodolf. "At the king's bidding fires blazed in reprisal, and the roofs

burning high compelled the poor farmers to rethink things…. All men yield to the warlord. There is no choice but to submit to the king."

In this manner Harald not only rid himself of his enemies, but many of his friends.

When a Norwegian landowner became too rich for his own good, Harald accused him of being descended from a rebel slave and confiscated all but one of his farms, and only the pleading of the poor man's wife and family persuaded the king not to enslave him again.

When the daughter of one of his *thegns* grew close to the king, she soon began showing a swollen belly. "She did not talk about it publicly, but other people did," recounts the *Morkinskinna*. "Some thought her condition was the fault of the king."

For his part Harald wanted little more to do with her. "I must return to the queen," he told the girl's father. "She is ill and soon due to give birth [this would be in reference to Thora and the birth of her second son, Olaf], but this is a serious matter." He surmised the daughter was infested by a parasite and advised how it should be killed, all of which sounds suspiciously like a cover story for an abortion. The girl herself blamed the king, if not for her condition, then for her ill treatment. Even after she recovered, with her health and reputation at least intact enough for a local chieftain to want to marry her, Harald refused his permission and sent her to a nunnery for life.

"It is said that King Harald was the most astute and clever of men," claims the *Flateyjarbok*. "Most things turned out according to his plan. He was a good poet. He felt free to insult people, and he took insults as well as anyone, as long as he was in a good mood."

Around 1053 the king was leading a fleet of three longships when they intercepted a lone boat coming down the coast. Harald called a challenge across the water. Most of the boat's crew and passengers were cowed, but one stepped up and called back, "We were in Iceland over the winter, and sailed from Gasir [in northern Iceland]. Bard is our captain's name. We made our landfall at Hitra [island, off the mouth of Trondheim Fjord] but overnight we laid off Agdanes."

The *Morkinskinna*, in recounting this scene, quotes the Icelander as "we were in Agdanes," Agdanes translating as Agdir's or Agdi's ness or headland

(the identity of Agdi being lost to history), but the *Flateyjarbok* has him saying, “we lay all night against Agdi’s point,” a double-entendre too good for the king to pass up.

Harald called back, “Did Agdi use you as he might use a woman?”

“Not yet,” answered the sailor, a cool response in light of the fact that in Iceland to accuse a man of such was an offense so egregious that it was a punishable by death.[2]

Having failed to sufficiently annoy the Icelander, Harald persisted. “Did you plan for him to use you later?”

“No, and there was good reason he did not shame us.”

“What was that?”

By this time the sailor knew he was addressing the king, and did not care. “Because, lord, if you must know, Agdi was waiting for better men than us. He expects you there this evening, when he will service you unsparingly.”

“You,” granted Harald, “are a great wordsmith.”

The wordsmith’s name was Sneglu-Halli – “Slender Halli” or “Irascible Halli,” either of which was applicable to him; in later years he was called Grautar-Halli, “Porridge Halli,” for his love of gruel. He was a skald of some repute in Iceland, come to make a name for himself in Norway.

Over the years Harald employed no fewer than thirteen skalds – he was fond of recruiting commoners, taking into his service any man who proved skillful with verse, which is how he acquired Stuf the Blind – to whom he could be both a great benefactor and an overbearing patron. His *hofudskald* or poet laureate, Thjodolf Arnorsson, had been with Harald since his Byzantine days and also served in the court of King Magnus. According to the sagas the king and the skald, walking the streets in Trondheim, overheard an argument between a tanner and a smith. Harald challenged Thjodolf to compose a verse on the subject. Thjodolf, as chief skald, thought the topic beneath him. So Harald added an extra degree of difficulty, instructing Thjodolf to recast the characters as mythical combatants, the god Thor and the giant Geirrod, and then again as the Germanic hero Sigurd and the dragon Fafnir, all while retaining the blacksmith/tanner motif. This Thjodolf did, on the fly, impressing Harald so that the king rewarded him with a gold ring. It sounds silly to modern readers, but the Norse, and skalds in particular, approached their wordplay with deadly seriousness. Harald was known to threaten his

poets with death if they did not perform up to his standards.

Both Halli and Thjodolf were from poor villages in northern Iceland. Both had lost their fathers early in their lives. Both had risen to high station in Nordic society on their skill with poetry. With so much in common, it might be expected they would become fast friends. Harald, however, tended to play one off against the other. They vied for the king's attention and recompense, to the point that they almost came to blows. But Halli's style was very different from that of courtly Thjodolf.

Thjodolf made a gift of a stallion to Harald. When Halli and the king went to see it, the horse's penis was unsheathed, which of course inspired Halli to compose a few lines on the subject, in part: "Thjodolf's horse has a filthy prick. He is a master fornicator."

The joke is that Halli might have meant the stallion serviced the mares, or that the horse made a woman of his master Thjodolf, but equally that Thjodolf made a woman of his master, the king. Harald rejoined with an equally double-edged comeback: "Tut tut, I will never have him that way."

Halli had an almost adversarial relationship with his patron, who constantly chided him for his love of buttery porridge but shared his smutty sense of humor. One day Harald saw Halli admiring his axe, which featured a gilded blade, a silver-worked haft, and a jewel set in the handle. The king asked if Halli had ever seen a better axe. Halli admitted he had not. So Harald continued, "Will you consent to be used like a woman for the axe?"

"No," said Halli, "but I can understand how you would want to gift it the same way you won it."

To which Harald, bested again, could only laugh. "So it shall be, Halli. Take it now and enjoy it. As it was given to me, I now give it to you."

That evening, sitting at table with the king, his consort Thora remarked that she felt it unjust that such a treasure should be given to Halli, "who is low-born, and awarded for his vile tongue, while others more deserving receive little."

The king informed her that he alone decided on whom he bestowed his gifts: "I choose not to take Halli's meaning in a bad way." He summoned Halli, and commanded him to demonstrate his silver, if somewhat tarnished, tongue for Thora, "to see how she takes it."

Halli bowed to the queen, and announced, "Thora is better than us. No one else is worthy of handling Harald's prick."

“Take him away and kill him,” she told Harald. “I will hear no more of his disgraceful talk.”

The king said no one would dare harm Halli without royal permission, “but I can do otherwise if you prefer that someone else lies with me. Do you not see that he complimented you?”

Having journeyed to the courts of Denmark and England (and developed a low opinion of their poets), Halli ultimately returned to Iceland where he died, most appropriately, on eating a bowl of porridge. The same boat that brought the news to Norway also brought word of the death of the former Varangian *manglabites* Bolli Bollason, murdered on his farm in the course of a blood feud. Of Bolli, who left as his widow Halldor Snorrason’s sister, Thordis Snorrasdottir, Harald said, “That great champion could only have fallen to villainy.” As for Halli, he said, “The poor bugger must have burst from too much porridge.”

With so many of his men hailing from Iceland, it would be only natural for Harald to have made the voyage himself. Though the Norse sagas make no mention of such a trip, in his *Descriptions of the Islands of the North*, Adam of Bremen claimed it was the “Northmen’s ruler, Harald, who explored the farthest reaches of the northern seas, but was barely able to safely retreat from the vast abyss, where he saw the faraway limits of earth, shrouded in gloom.”

It may be his marshal Ulf, as an Icelander, who was responsible for the parsimonious king’s generosity to that land. In 1056, when famine struck Iceland, Harald sent four ship-loads of flour to relieve the islanders. He also donated a bell for a church there, which had been built of timber donated by King Olaf.

But like Olaf, Harald was religious only to the degree it suited his purposes. At Nidaros he built churches dedicated to St. Mary and St. Gregory, and completed the Church of St. Olaf that Magnus had begun, none of which redeemed him in the eyes of the church. “The miracles that occur every day at the royal tomb in Nidaros are evidence of his [Olaf’s] saintliness,” wrote Adam of Bremen. “Although this man, forsaken by God, witnessed these wonders, he was unmoved. With clawed fingers this Harald seized the offerings, and in particular the treasure which by supreme devotion the

faithful had gathered at his brother's tomb, and gave it away to his henchmen."

In 1054 the leaders of the Eastern and Western churches, unable to agree on (among many other issues of little importance to laymen) whether the Pope in Rome or the patriarch in Constantinople was Christendom's supreme leader, finally sundered in the so-called Great Schism. Norway was nominally part of the Western faith, but its king had spent too much time in the East. Harald not only permitted Eastern priests to visit his court, but he also sent them on to proselytize in Iceland, and consecrated his own bishops, all of which made him infamous to the Latin church in Northern Europe. "That is why the archbishop [Adalbert of Hamburg], passionate with zeal for God, sent his emissaries to the king, admonishing him in writing for his despotic arrogance," wrote Adam. "Driven to rage by these decrees, the tyrant spitefully ordered the bishop's legates to begone, declaring that he knew of no archbishop or priest in Norway whose authority exceeded that of the king himself."

Harald nurtured the growth of Gamle Oslo, today's Old Town of Oslo on the east side of the Aker River, from the hamlet grown up around the Church of St. Clement into the beginnings of the modern city. Partially this was intended to become a trade center to rival Hedeby, but mostly to serve as a forward base of operations in Harald's ongoing war against Denmark.

He still hadn't caught Svein, but Svein almost caught him. Toward the end of the decade Harald took a small force from Oslo across the Kattegat to Jutland, and sailed up the Limfjord, which cuts nearly all the way across the north part of the peninsula like a narrow river before widening into a saltwater lake on the western coast. While the Norwegians were plundering the shores of this inland sea, word came that a large Danish fleet had entered the fjord, cutting off their retreat. But Harald knew that to the west only a slim isthmus of sand about half a mile across separated the lake from the North Sea.[3] The evening before the Danes closed for battle, the Norwegians unloaded their longships on the isthmus, dragged them across to the sea, loaded them back up and by dawn were sailing away, chanting, "Harald slipped through the Danes' fingers!"

The king, though, swore he would never go raiding in Denmark again

without more troops and bigger ships.

To that end, over the winter of 1061–62, Harald commissioned one of the greatest dragon ships of the Viking Age. Though its name was not preserved in the sagas, historians have variously christened it the *Ormen* (*Serpent*), or the *Stor Dreki* (*Great Dragon*). It was a *drakkar*, bigger than Magnus's *Visund*, bigger even than King Olaf Tryggvason's *Ormen Lange* (*Long Serpent*), built over sixty years earlier. That *drakkar* had boasted thirty-four "rooms," or pairs of rowing benches. According to Snorri, Harald's ship was the same length as the *Long Serpent*, but broader: "Its prow had a dragon's head, and the stern had a dragon's tail, and the bows were inlaid with gold. It had thirty-five pairs of rowing-benches, with plenty of space between each. It was indeed a magnificent vessel."

Of the five Viking ships recovered in 1962 at Skuldelev in Roskilde Fjord in northern Zealand, one, *Skuldelev 2*, was determined from analysis of its wood to have been built in Dublin around the year 1042, almost 100 feet long and fifteen feet across the beam, thought to have housed sixty benches. It was the largest known longship until the discovery of *Roskilde 6*, salvaged from almost the same site in 1996–97 and dated to sometime after 1025. Less than half this ship survived, but enough to estimate its length at over 120 feet, with as many as seventy-eight benches, making it certainly a *drakkar* worthy of a *jarl*, or even a king. As *Roskilde 6* is thought to have been sailed into shallow water and broken up – or, as were many of the Skuldelev ships, sunk – and dates to roughly his era, Harald must certainly have heard of it, if not sailed in it, and certainly desired a ship of equal stature for himself.

He would need it. "That winter," wrote Snorri, "King Harald sent messengers south to King Svein in Denmark, challenging him to come north to the Gautelf river in the spring and meet him in battle, to settle their struggle and decide once and for all which of them should rule both lands."

The two had issued such challenges to each other so many times over the past fifteen years or so, that probably neither they nor their men thought anything more would come of it. They were wrong. This time Harald and Svein would finally have their matchup, in one of the greatest Viking-on-Viking battles of the age.

NOTES

1 Even a thousand years later Torghatten, the 850-foot granite peak on the island of Torget across from Bronnoysund, is famous for the 500-foot water-carved tunnel that runs all the way through a cleft in the mountain, allowing daylight completely through from the other side.

2 Like Romans before them, Vikings concerned themselves less with whom a man used sexually than who used him.

3 Over the centuries the isthmus was frequently cut by storms. In 1027 Knut the Great had sailed into Limfjord from the west, and in 1825 another flood cut an opening which has lasted into modern times, rendering the northern part of Jutland an island.

XXVII

The Battle of the Nisa

Bravely Harald hastened
To keep his part of the bargain.
Norway's lord is spending
This night at the kingdoms' border.
Harald plans a thing *with King Svein*
At the appointed place.
A tryst to please the ravens
If the Danes do not run.

Thjodolf Arnorsson

By that summer of 1062, King Harald had levied up one of the greatest armies Norway had ever seen. To embark them for Denmark required a fleet of at least 150 longships, plus an equal number of smaller transports and support vessels. Assuming an average crew of forty to fifty men – the cargo ships might carry much less than that, but the longships much more – implies a strength of perhaps 15,000 men. Harald was so confident of victory that he made a family affair of the venture. Besides his marshal and brother-in-law Ulf Ospaksson, he brought along the royal consort Thora, her maternal uncle Skjalg Erlingsson, and their own eldest son, Prince Magnus, age fourteen. (This was not young Magnus's first expedition. In 1058, at age ten, he is said to have led a fleet into the Irish Sea – though, more realistically, he served as a figurehead, leaving command and the fighting, if any, to older and more experienced warriors.) This time Magnus was accompanied by his

presumably older friend Thorolf Mostrarskegg (“Most Beard”); each had his own ship and crew of fighting men.

In this contest against the Danes, even exiled Norwegians had to choose sides. For his part Finn Arnason still held his brother Kalf’s death against Harald, and elected to fight for Svein. Hakon Ivarsson, on the other hand, had worn out his welcome at the Danish court, and saw a way to possibly earn Harald’s respect and Ragnhild’s hand. “Here is our situation,” he told his men. “King Svein is beloved and our king is not, but I am more disposed to help him.”

Hakon had ten ships under his command. He took them all north to join Harald. In his hour of need the King of Norway was willing to let bygones be bygones. Old *Jarl* Orm had died. There was room at the top. “King Harald gave Hakon the jarldom and authority which had been *Jarl* Orm’s,” wrote Snorri, “and [if they were not already married] Hakon married Princess Ragnhild. In return, Hakon swore fealty to King Harald.”

It was a Saturday when Harald’s magnificent *drakkar* shoved off down the Nid River (modern Nidelva) into Trondheimsfjord. Thjodolf recalled the summer sun gleaming on its gold-worked dragon prow, and townswomen lining the riverbanks proudly marveling at its seventy rowers pulling in unison. He vowed the enemy would quake in terror when those men exchanged their oars for shields and blades. Out at sea the fleet raised sails and set off down the coast, rounding the southern cape of Norway into the Skagerrak, making for Oslofjord. There, however, they ran into a rare summer gale, so bad that the fleet broke up, with the individual ships seeking shelter in the local fjords and behind the coastal islands. Thjodolf recalled Harald’s *drakkar* heaving against its anchor lines as the storm waters lashed its dragon head.

It was some time until the tempest cleared and the fleet could regroup around the royal ship. Harald led them down the coast of Halland, which is now Sweden, to the appointed place of battle, off the mouth of the Gautelf river. He was doubtless unsurprised to find the Danes were not there.

Whether the Norwegians had missed the appointment due to the storm, or the Danes had again declined battle, the end result was the same. That this was a veritable repeat of the campaign of 1050, when Svein ducked an invitation to combat at this very same place and the Norwegians continued south to terrorize Jutland and burn Hedeby, could not have been very far

from Harald's mind. As he had done then, he cut loose his militia – the farmers and bondmen – sending them home in their slow cargo ships. That reduced his fleet to 150 longships, but all manned by housecarls and veteran fighting men. Together they ranged further down the Halland coast into Laholm Bay, plundering as they went.

But Svein must have had the same idea: that Harald, greedy to reap more riches and glory for himself and his *thegns*, would send home half his army as before. Svein had 300 ships – equal to the original Norwegian fleet, and now twice its size – hidden south of the island of Fyn (modern Funen). When his spies and scout boats reported that Harald had acted true to form, the Danes came swarming up across the Kattegat. Late on August 9 they arrived at the mouth of the Nisa River (modern Nissan) at the north end of Laholm Bay, between the Norwegians and home.

On sighting the enemy fleet, Harald ordered a trumpet blown to summon his chieftains together aboard his ship for an impromptu *thing*. "Even though he [Svein] has many men, his ships are smaller than ours, and it's a good bet his troops are less dependable," he told them, pointing out that years of raiding had won the Norwegians gold, but little glory. "I will thank you to tell me that you prefer to fight, but if not, you are free to sail away."

Some of them wanted to run for it – escape by night, going around or through the Danish ships, and make for Norway. "They all left it up to him [Harald]," recounts the *Morkinskinna*, "though they declared the odds appeared nearly overwhelming."

"It seems you want to hear my opinion," Harald said, "and so you shall. We have enough seasoned troops that rather than flee, we should all fall atop each other dead."

Victory or death. Another of Harald's skalds, Stein Herdisarson, was aboard the marshal Ulf Ospaksson's ship that day, and remembered the moment in his account of the battle: "Both kings refused to yield, and Harald asked no quarter."

Thegns and housecarls donned mail, helmets, sword belts. The oarsmen bent to their task, wheeling the sleek longships around parallel to each other, line-abreast, with the immense royal *drakkar* in the center. Harald's marshal Ulf told his crew, "Pull our ship up front, next to the king's."

Jarl Hakon's ships took position on one flank, and the men of the Trondelag on the other. With each longship averaging about twenty feet

across the beam, the Norwegians presented a wall of towering dragon prows over half a mile across. “Bravely King Harald faced his foes in battle,” recounted Stein. “With a hundred and fifty longships he awaited the Danish attack.”

Across the water, as evening fell the Danes likewise prepared for battle. Svein, perhaps more trusting of subordinates, did not adhere to Harald’s one-*jarl*-per-land rule. His immense force included no fewer than six *jarls*, and all their men, including Harald’s former friend and liegeman Finn Arnason. (It was Finn’s jarldom of Halland that Harald had been raiding.) Svein reminded all his men of their years of suffering at Norwegian hands. “Let it be remembered that we attack boldly. There are many noblemen and vaunted champions in our fleet. Let us now settle this issue so that we can gain peace and retain our honor.” With his ship in the center of the Danish line, and Finn’s at its side, Svein was finally ready to give Harald the battle the Norwegian king had sought so long.

“Now,” wrote Stein, “the king of Denmark, eager for the clash of weapons, comes racing across the water with 300 warships.”

That should have made for a line twice as wide as Harald’s, with the ships on the Danish flanks free to wrap around and envelop the enemy, Byzantine-style. According to the eyewitness accounts of the battle, though, the Danes attempted no such maneuver. They may not have been familiar with the tactic, or it may simply be that in the tight confines of Laholm Bay near the mouth of the Nisa there was not room for such a broad front or sweeping maneuver, in which case the Danes must have doubled their ranks, one row of ships behind the other. That does not mean, however, that half of the fleet was out of the fight, for Vikings did not fight sea battles as the Byzantines did, maneuvering to scrape away oars and spray Greek fire. The goal here was not to destroy enemy ships, which were highly valuable even without cargo, but to kill their crews and capture them intact. To do that, Vikings fought battles at sea the way they fought battles on land. They even made their own battlegrounds.

As the fleets neared each other, Harald ordered his ships to be bound together. Oars were pulled in and stowed. Lines and chains were tossed over gunwales and pulled taut. Hulls thumped together, and the Norwegian fleet became a single giant raft, like the Saracen fleet at the Battle of the Masts. The Danes did likewise, and Laholm Bay suddenly had two artificial islands,

drifting like miniature continents, about to collide.

"But since the fleets were so massive," wrote Snorri, "there were still a great number of ships out of formation. Their captains were free to fight however they liked, and their tactics differed a good bit."

Jarl Hakon, the veteran of so many Viking raids, chose to fight his own way. He declined to have his ships chained to the rest of the Norwegian fleet, but kept them free to maneuver and attack on their own. Some might have accused Hakon, who until recently had done his fighting for Svein, of being that much better prepared to flee, or switch sides if the battle went, as it very likely would, against the Norwegians. If so, no such opinions were written down.

The kings and *jarls* took position aft in their ships, the better to direct their forces, with Harald in the best spot of all, high in the stern of his big *drakkar*. "Eager for battle," wrote Thjodolf, "Harald urged his men to be steadfast. Warriors raised their shields all along the gunwales. The undaunted king lined his dragon ship with a wall of living shields, so that no foe could find a way through."

Facing each other, the two lines of ships came together like jaws full of jagged teeth. Vikings did not employ shipborne catapults or ballistas, but in the last moments before contact, bowmen on both sides took up their weapons, drew string to ear and sent clouds of arrows through the half-light. Then it was spears and grappling hooks going out between the fleets, both sides calling on God, or the gods, as the jaws closed, wooden prows thudded into each other, and men poured forward to be the first to strike a blow for their king.

The fighting in such a battle was fiercest at the bows of opposing ships, where men struggled to gain control of each other's rails, in order to climb over and board. In this kind of fighting the larger Norwegian longships, and especially the *drakkar* with its taller freeboard, offered an advantage of "high ground" over the smaller Danish vessels. Once a crossing was made and defended, reinforcements could pour over onto the enemy ship and drive its crew back, or overboard. Ships taken on the flanks could be cut loose and set adrift to be reclaimed by the eventual victor. Ships in the center, though, like Svein's and Harald's, could be constantly reinforced from either side, or in the Danes' case from ships tied aft. In contrast to the rapid, surprise-and-conquer nature of Viking raids on land, their sea fights were slow, bloody

affairs.

This one commenced late in the evening, though in August, in the Kattegat, darkness never completely falls. The battle of the Nisa, like the battle of Stiklestad thirty-two years earlier, was fought in a hellish twilight in which a man might never see the arrow or sword-swing that killed him.

"Agonizing wounds gaped, blood gushed into the sea," recalled Stein. "The two great warlords, shieldless, scorning armor, called for swordplay…. Stones and arrows were flying, blades were stained crimson. Everywhere doomed men fell before the attack."

According to Thjodolf, Harald did his share of killing. "Norway's king spent the night bending his bow, showering arrows on the white shields of Denmark," he wrote. "Shields were as nothing to arrows from Harald's deadly *drakkar*."

Meanwhile Hakon's ships roved up and down the lines, maneuvering to cut off enemy vessels from the Danish formation, boarding and taking them. "*Jarl* Hakon and his crew," wrote Snorri, "took on the Danish ships that were likewise sailing free, and he cleared every one he could grapple. When the Danes saw this happening, they all tried to withdraw, but even as they fell back Hakon pursued, until they were near to being routed."

Both the *Heimskringla* and the *Morkinskinna* attest that the fighting off the Nisa went on all night, though just three hours after midnight the sun was coming back up over the river. In that steady attrition, however, sheer weight of numbers began to tell. The Norwegians simply did not have the manpower to win out over the Danes.

It was worst on the flanks, where the Danish advantage was most one-sided. The ship of Thora's uncle Skjalg Erlingsson came loose from the Norwegian fleet. Singled out like that, with no hope of reinforcement, a crew had their hands full just staving off attackers, let alone maneuvering. Out of control, Skjalg's ship drifted aground. Longships were of such shallow draft that, once stranded, a vessel could be boarded by men simply wading out to it. Halland was Danish territory. Warriors came out from the shore and stormed Skjalg's ship, killing him and all his men.

"At that moment," reported Snorri, "a little skiff rowed up to hail *Jarl* Hakon's ship, alerting him that one of the Norwegian flanks was failing and that many of the king's men were being slaughtered."

"Hakon's ships, being unattached, had free range and ran in among the

Danish ships, attacking to both sides," note the chroniclers, adding as an aside, "His crews were also armed with the best weapons and armor. Hakon was a veteran Viking raider and his men were tough champions."

"*Jarl* Hakon fought like that all night, keeping his ships in reserve and attacking wherever he was most needed," concluded Snorri, "and wherever he attacked, none could withstand him."

That said, the fighting was heaviest in the center, around the royals. Harald's bodyguards defended him just as he had once defended emperors. "The Norwegian veterans shielded Harald," wrote Stein. "By dawn the raven received his fill of corpses at the mouth of the Nisa River."

Arnor Jarlaskald was back in the Orkneys at the time, but as he heard it and retold it, Harald spent most of the battle happily picking away at Svein's shield wall with his arrows. Where Thora was in all this is not mentioned in the sagas, but she was there, and there was no better place for her than behind her king, seeing a side of him she had never known: the battle-mad Viking, reveling in blood and gore and death. Harald never lost faith in victory. He knew his Norwegians did not have to defeat the entire enemy fleet. They only had to defeat the enemy king.

"The dead began to pile up on the Danish side," recounts the *Morkinskinna*. "Many died, many fled." Svein, soon finding it hard to find reinforcements to board his ship, eventually lost too many men to defend it. "Then the Norwegians swarmed aboard the king's own ship and drove the defenders back along the gunwales."

"King Harald and his men climbed aboard King Svein's ship," agreed Snorri, "and swept it so completely clean that all the Danes on board were killed, except those who leaped overboard." Among the survivors, of course, was Svein, who took to a small boat to make his escape. Seeing his banner fall, the rest of the Danes lost heart. They abandoned their ships which had been tied together, and those who could cut loose, rowed off.

Harald tried to mount a pursuit, but the bay was so jammed with drifting, abandoned longships – most accounts claim that no fewer than seventy Danish ships were cleared – that he found it impossible. *Jarl* Hakon did not even bother. He was tending to his wounded when a little boat came alongside his ship, with the occupant calling for him. The stranger said his name was Vandrad, which in the sagas is a common alias for someone in trouble, and asked Hakon to grant him his life.

Hakon surely recognized this man as King Svein – they had met many times during the wayward *jarl*'s exile in Denmark – yet furnished him with two trusted men to escort him through the Norwegian ships to the shore. By morning Svein had once again escaped Harald's wrath.

Not so Finn Arnason. Now old and nearly blind, when his men fled his longship, the former *jarl* simply sat down on deck and awaited Harald's coming. According to the *Morkinskinna*, the king was of a mind to have some fun with his captive. "We meet again, Finn. We last saw each other in Norway. Did the Danes not protect you? Now we are left with the thankless work of dragging you around, a blind man, just to keep you alive."

"The Norwegians have much thankless work," answered Finn, "worst of all following your orders."

Harald said, "Do you wish your life spared, even if you do not deserve it?"

"Not by you, dog."

"Would you prefer your kinsman Magnus to spare you?" Magnus, as Thora's son, was Finn's great-nephew.

Finn sneered, "It is not in that whelp's power to spare anyone."

Harald just laughed. "Will you instead accept your life from Thora?"

"Is she here?"

"She is," said Harald, and perhaps Thora saw again a side of her king that she hadn't known – a king who could take pleasure in baiting a blind, helpless old man, a former liegeman and friend.

Finn was done humoring him. "No wonder you fought so well," he told Harald, "with the mare at your back." (The reference is to horse-fighting, at the time a popular sport among Scandinavians – the Icelanders called it *hestavig* – who found that stallions bit and kicked harder if they could smell, close at hand, a mare in heat.)

In the end Harald not only spared Finn, but he kept him around, if nothing else as a kind of plaything, the way a cat toys with a mouse before killing it.

After the Norwegian wounded were cared for, their fallen seen to, and the Danish dead sent ashore for the locals to bury, Harald divided the spoils of war among his men. There was more than enough to go around, and plenty of glory besides. The battle of the Nisa had been a great victory. *Jarl* Hakon in particular came in for everyone's praise. All agreed that his had been the

decisive action of the battle.

Young Prince Magnus, however, hungered for more. That night, as the Norwegian fleet lay at anchor, he and his friend Thorolf Mostrarskegg slipped their anchors and had their two ships rowed to shore, where they disembarked and went off with their crews to make a name for themselves. Come morning, they were found missing, and they did not return.

It was soon apparent they had run into a force of Danes, eager for vengeance. There had been a fight in which most of the Norwegians were killed, but neither Magnus nor Thorolf, nor their bodies, were found.

Thora must have been wild with grief, but in the *Morkinskinna*'s account (Snorri, for unknown reasons, skipped the episode entirely), Harald, even though he thought both boys were probably dead, took the news rather stoically, even for a hardbitten Norseman. He had the fleet wait as long as he could in hopes the lads would find their way back, but eventually decided to sail for home without them.

But then, Harald doubtless had a very different perspective than Thora on the loss of their son. He surely consoled himself by remembering those long ago days when he, at just about Magnus's age, and despite being wounded, with the help of a friend had escaped a battle and crossed Scandinavia to reach safety. If he could do it, so too could Magnus. The prince had sought a way to prove himself to his father. Now he had found it.

The Fates, spinning the thread of every man's life, had come full circle again.

XXVIII

SWEDEN

Harald finally brought the fight to a close.
Peace commenced the third year;
Steel had bitten shields off the coast.

Thjodolf Arnorsson

That autumn the Norwegian fleet returned home to Oslo (some sources maintain it sailed around the southern cape and further up the coast to Vik) for the wounded to recuperate, ships to be repaired, grief to be assuaged, and life to get back to normal. As Harald went about his kingly duties, he was somewhat dismayed to learn the talk of the town was not of his glory, but that of *Jarl* Hakon, who everyone agreed deserved credit for the triumph. The king groused to anyone who would listen, "We have sometimes won victory when Hakon was not around."

On another occasion Harald was conversing outside of a cellar tavern in town when he overheard the men inside, drinking and going on about the battle, particularly about *Jarl* Hakon. "He was the bravest and cleverest in battle," they all agreed, "and he was luckiest too. Everything he did worked according to plan. The victory was his."

The king stuck his head inside the door and snorted, "Now everyone wants to be called Hakon." And he stalked off.

His foul mood could reasonably be explained by the loss of his eldest son and his family's grief, except that some weeks or months after the battle, Magnus's friend Thorolf Mostrarskegg came into town, on foot, bearing the

prince on his back, wounded but alive.

"Thorolf was very tired and worn out from the march," understates the *Morkinskinna*. From the mouth of the Nisa in Halland to Oslo in Norway is about 260 miles, and to Vik almost twice that. Just as long-dead Rognvald Brusason had saved Harald all those years before, Thorolf had borne the prince the entire way.[1] Like Harald's old wound, Magnus's is not described in the sagas. It was enough to cripple him at least temporarily, but the sagas do not describe him as permanently disabled, so he must have fully recovered.

The king's reaction was as might be expected from a worried father – at first overjoyed to see the boys alive, then ready to kill them himself. He demanded to know whether they had expected the Danes to simply surrender, "or did you think they would not dare to meet you in battle? You showed no sense in leaving our protection to venture inland with no more men than that. You could have been content with the victory that we all won together. You have marred our honor, but there is nothing to do about it now."

That still left the problems of Svein, and of Hakon, which as it turned out were the same problem. Over the winter word came that not only had Svein survived, but he had escaped to Zealand and was raising a new army. Harald was furious and could not understand how the Danish king had escaped alive from the midst of the battle.

Eventually one of Hakon's men who had escorted Svein out of danger let slip the secret. The story soon reached Harald, who immediately set out with 200 men for Hakon's jarldom in Oppland, in central Norway. After riding all night and all day, they stopped in a small market for resupply. Another of the king's men, sympathetic to Hakon (here we begin to see the payback for Harald's maltreatment of those once loyal to him), sent one of the local farmers ahead to warn the *jarl*. Knowing second chances with Harald were hard to come by, Hakon, his wife Ragnhild and their people promptly absconded to Sweden.

To pursue him there meant war, for Harald's kinsman King Onund had long since died, and his brother and successor Emund the Old as well. Sweden was now ruled by King Steinkel, who was no relation to Harald. (Though he may have been a brother of *Jarl* Eilif Rognvaldsson, Harald's old compatriot in

the service of King Yaroslav against the Poles.) An invasion was not to be undertaken lightly, and not with a mere 200 warriors. It was going to require some forethought. So Harald and his men made themselves merry overnight with whatever food and drink Hakon had left behind, and in the morning set off for Nidaros again.

Let alone fight a two-front, simultaneous war against both Denmark and Sweden, Harald was increasingly reluctant even to continue his fight with Svein. He had little to show for fifteen years of conflict. The Danish king had become an expert at guerrilla tactics, for the most part avoiding decisive battle with the Norwegians and managing always to survive to fight again. Pillaging and re-pillaging the same Danish towns and coasts every summer was becoming less and less cost effective. The Norwegians had long since stolen everything worth stealing, and there were few Danes left who were worth killing, raping, ransoming or enslaving. The returns simply were not making up for the expense of mounting these yearly expeditions. It was becoming more than the Norwegians could bear.

Hakon's jarldom of Oppland was the first to rebel. The royal tax collectors had it put to them that as long as the *jarl* was alive and had not surrendered his domain, his people owed their taxes to him, not the king. If Harald wanted the income, he could take it up with Hakon. "So the king reaped no taxes from Oppland that winter," wrote Snorri.

Furthermore, whenever Harald went north, Hakon – taking a page from Svein's manual on war-fighting with Norway – crept in from Sweden to claim those taxes and punish anyone cooperating with the king. On Harald's return he would withdraw back over the border. The Norwegians, in turn, began harrying into Sweden. The stage was set for a new war. But Harald could not afford to take on two enemies at once.

The king had tired of having grumpy old Finn Arnason around. "I see now, Finn, that we will never be friends, not even as kinsmen," Harald told him. "You are free to return to your King Svein."

"I accept your offer," Finn said, "and the sooner I leave, the more thankful I'll be."

It may be, though, that in sending his old friend back to Denmark, Harald used him as a go-between.

“That winter [1063–64],” wrote Snorri, “messages went back and forth between Norway and Denmark. The Norwegians and Danes all wanted peace, and they urged their kings to come to an agreement.” Eventually it was arranged that Harald and Svein should meet again at the Gautelf, the River of the Geats – actually, to meet there for the first time, for on previous appointments the Danes had always failed to show – this time, in peace instead of war.

Come summer the Norwegian fleet set sail again to journey down the coast, and this time after crossing the Skagerrak they found Svein and his fleet waiting for them at the appointed place and time. At the sight Harald must have been sorely tempted to break the agreement and ambush his old enemy, but he kept his eye on the bigger picture. Denmark had been picked clean. The Danes could keep it. There was more to be gained by fighting Hakon than Svein.

However, not everyone was happy about reconciliation between the kings. Plenty of people on both sides had suffered more loss in life and property than Harald and Svein ever had. “No sooner had negotiations begun,” recounted Snorri, “than everyone began crying about their losses from all those years of war.” Now they demanded reparations.

“Worthy farmers argued loudly at the meeting,” recorded *King Harald’s Saga*. “Bitter words roused nothing but wrath.” Soon Harald and Svein took up their people’s causes and complaints, and very nearly fell to fighting again. “Quarrelsome men have no wish for peace. With royal pride offended, anger came up between them.”

Wiser heads persevered, though, and the two kings were prevailed upon to sit back down and work things out, which, probably to everyone’s surprise and relief, they finally did.

Snorri recorded, “According to the terms, King Harald was to have Norway, and King Svein Denmark, according to the ancient boundaries between them. Neither king was to pay compensation. Their war was to cease, with each side keeping whatever they currently held. The peace was to remain in force for as long as they both were kings.” To bind it, Harald’s daughter Ingigerd, aged eighteen, was betrothed for eventual marriage to Svein’s son Olaf, then about twenty-four. “Harald and Svein exchanged hostages for peace,” proclaims the *Heimskringla*. “It was God’s will. May they honor their oaths and keep the peace forever, held sacred by both

nations. The treaty was sealed before witnesses."

Portly King Steinkel of Sweden – given to drink and parties ahead of governing and fighting – could nevertheless see war on the horizon, and appealed to King Svein for aid. Having made his hard-won peace with Harald, Svein refused to break the treaty, but advised Steinkel that he had nothing to lose by making Hakon's relationship with Sweden official. He should name Hakon as *Jarl* of Gautland, the Land of the Geats in south-central Sweden, where he would be an obstacle to Harald's advance (as Svein had appointed Finn Arnason in Halland), then back him to the fullest, and leave the fighting to him.

Later that summer, when Harald's tax collectors returned to Oppland for his due, they were rebuffed again. The locals maintained their loyalty to their *jarl* before their king. As Hakon was now a Swedish *jarl*, this was tantamount to secession. Harald had had enough.

Hakon, knowing Vikings preferred to travel by water and despised long overland marches, retreated deep in-country. It would be difficult for Harald to get at him… unless he covered most of the distance by boat.

That fall Harald took sixty ships up the Gautelf river to the island of Konungahella, modern Konghelle, now in Sweden but then in southern Norway. There, in the year 1020, peace had been made between the two countries, when Harald's brother Olaf and Sweden's then-King Olaf Skautkonung reached agreement after the former married the latter's daughter, Astrid. Now, forty-four years later, Konungahella was to be the launch pad for war.

Almost forty miles upstream at Trollhattan, the Gautelf now backs up behind a dam, but then it was the site of some formidable cataracts, where Vaenir (modern Vanern), Europe's third-largest lake, drained into the Gautelf. Harald had his entire fleet unloaded, portaged overland around the falls, reloaded and put back out on the lake. The weather having turned snowy and bitterly cold, the lake was already icing up as the Norwegians rowed across and disembarked on the eastern shore, Harald leaving part of his force there to protect his ships.

Hakon saw them coming and came down to meet them, drawing up his army on the brow of a hill. The Norwegians took a similarly defensive

position across a deep, boggy valley on the opposite slope, daring the Geats to come at them. As Harald put it, “Let us see whether they will attack us. Hakon is a headstrong man.”

They did not have to wait long. Outnumbered, Hakon had hoped to defend from a position of strength as well, but now saw that the Norwegians were not to be goaded. Worse, the poor Geats in his force were not equipped for the cold, and the high latitude worked in Harald’s favor, for daylight was already fading. The choice came down to fight or freeze. “We must now make our move,” Hakon told his men, “though I had wished for the king to attack first. The advantage of terrain will now be his.”

Ragnhild had given Hakon her father’s banner, embroidered in gold, which we might assume to have been a version of her ancestral sigil, the flag her grandfather, Magnus’s father Olaf, had waved at Stiklestad: the *wyrm*, the sea serpent, on a white field. According to Hakon’s fragmentary saga, “With it came the admonishment [from Ragnhild] to either return with it or, if it was lost, not at all.”

With his lady’s flag flying overhead, Hakon led his army down into the valley and started up the slope toward the shield wall of the Norwegians, who were shouting eager war cries and clapping their swords on their shields.

Underneath his raven banner Land-Waster and wearing his mail coat Emma, the king, too, must have recalled Stiklestad. There, Olaf’s *svinfylking*, his boar-snout formation, had rushed down slope and broken the enemy’s shield wall, only to be swallowed up in a catastrophic double envelopment. In this fight Harald had an advantage of both numbers and position, and had no need to trade one for the other. He warned his men, “Even though we shout and make noise, we dare not move down off this high ground until they come up to us.”

As the Swedes and Danes made their way uphill toward them, however, battle madness got the better of the king’s troops. According to Snorri, “When the Geats advanced up the slope, the Norwegians swept down upon them.”

They had committed the military sin of breaking their own shield wall. It would be the downfall of the Anglo-Saxons at Fulford, and again at Hastings. Harald must have cursed his men for fools, but there was nothing to be done about it now, except wade in and hope to cut a way through to victory.

The Norwegians plunged down the hill like a torrent of steel, and where

they met the enemy shield wall they made a great splash of blood, of severed limbs, of spurting guts and tumbling heads. “Many of the *jarl*’s men were slain,” reported Snorri, “and some of them ran.”

“Hakon was his old self,” recounts the *Morkinskinna*, “fighting at the head of his best warriors. But the king had more men, better equipped, and casualties began to mount on Hakon’s side.”

The ill-provisioned, inexperienced Swedes were no match for Harald’s battle-hardened veterans and housecarls. Hakon, at least, and his own Norwegians and Danes held their ground, their position marked by Ragnhild’s standard. Harald, seeing his men carrying the day, wanted that flag and let everyone know it. The fighting pressed so close around Hakon that his bannerman was slain. The flag fell and was caught up by the Norwegians.

With that the fight went out of the *jarl*. Hakon and his surviving *thegns* cut and ran, down the hill into the nearest woods. According to *King Harald’s Saga*, “The Norwegians did not chase the fleers very far, since night was already falling.”

Harald’s men gathered up what equipment they wished from the enemy dead. “On their return,” recounted Snorri, “King Harald had both flags [Hakon’s and his own Land-Waster] carried before him. The talk was of whether Hakon had been killed.”

The *jarl* was not only alive, but still willing to risk death before dishonor. According to the *Morkinskinna*, “Hakon worried that the princess would accuse him of keeping a loose hold on King Magnus’s flag.”

The Norwegians’ way back to Vaenir led along a path through the woods so narrow that the army was reduced to marching single-file in the dark. Suddenly a man darted from the undergrowth, fatally speared the man carrying Hakon’s banner, grabbed it and disappeared back into the forest, so quickly that no one could catch him.

Harald’s appreciation of this feat, as per the *Morkinskinna*, showed nothing but respect, admiration and even good wishes for his opponents. “That could only have been Hakon, for no lesser man could have struck such a blow,” he mused. “He will no doubt think this coup as great a victory as mine, but knowing my kinswoman Ragnhild’s temper he would not regain her bed without that flag. With it, though, I expect they will make their own peace.”

Hakon did not admit defeat. The weather had turned so cold that the

Norwegians' ships became iced in on the lake. They were forced to go raiding ashore for supplies, but whenever they did they were subject to surprise attacks and reprisals. Hakon made it known that Steinkel was on his way with a sizable Swedish army, and that Svein of Denmark had reneged on the treaty and was coming with his own army to cut off the Norwegian retreat downriver. None of it was true, but the possibility was so terrifying that the Norwegians, whom the king busied with cutting a path through the ice, began fighting among themselves, with one of Prince Magnus's men killing one of Harald's. King and prince were on the point of falling out when their men intervened. Eventually the Norwegians got clear of the ice, portaged their ships to the river, and sailed for home. Hakon had lost the battle but won the war… for the time being.

Harald doubtless contemplated his eventual return to Sweden, and future years of raiding and looting there. But, having pushed Hakon out of the country, his immediate goal had to be reconquering those parts of Norway that had sworn loyalty to their *jarl* ahead of their king.

Therefore, in the first months of 1065 Harald undertook a new campaign of retribution and reprisal – some would say terror – not against the Danes or Swedes, but against his own people.

For a year and a half the king and his warriors waged war on his own subjects, starting with Romerike, northeast of Oslo. The landowners there had withheld their taxes to support Hakon's rebellion. Now they paid the price. "The king ordered farmers seized," wrote Snorri, "some of them maimed, others slain, and most of them robbed of everything they owned."

From there he marched on Heidmark, between Oppland and the Trondelag, and did likewise. Then it was the turn of Hadaland, north of Oslo, some of Norway's most fertile farmland, but some of its most desolate after the king was through with it. "Peasants pleaded mercy," recorded Thjodolf, "but the verdict was pronounced with fire."

By the spring of 1066 he had burned his way through Ringerike, in Norway's southeast, and perhaps not coincidentally held out for last, for this was Harald's hereditary land, that of his father Sigurd Syr. It does not seem he spared any mercy for it.

Finally all of Norway, like Denmark and to some extent Sweden, had felt

the full heat of the king's wrath. Of this Thjodolf wrote, "No skald has words for the royal retribution that left the Opplands derelict and empty. Over eighteen months King Harald earned renown. His deeds will be remembered forever."

Indeed they have been. But that year and a half of savage terror and oppression also stained Harald's legacy. He could no longer be said to rule Norway as a just king, but only as a tyrant – not through love and loyalty but through fear and oppression, marauding and looting his own kingdom because it was easier than looting foreign lands. At the end of it he was virtually alone, dreaded by his neighbors and his people alike. Having thoroughly reduced his own people to craven subjects, he might have once again turned on Hakon and Sweden, and undertaken another fifteen years of relentless, and probably just as futile, pillaging and plundering. But in that summer of 1066 another proposition presented itself, when a strange sailing vessel hove into the fjord at Oslo, where Harald was then holding court.

Looking out upon this visitor, a trained nautical eye may have noticed its longer, more sloped stem- and sternposts, its response to the waves indicating a deeper draft than the typical Scandinavian ship, and an unfamiliar pattern on its sail – enough to identify it as English in origin.

What we know of Anglo-Saxon ship design from the few surviving archaeological sites – Snape from circa AD 550, Sutton Hoo from about AD 600, Graveney Marsh from around AD 895 – typically predate the Viking period, when English shipwrights still built in their own style. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, in describing the fleet Alfred the Great ordered built to fight the Danes in the year 897, claims, "They were shaped in neither Frisian fashion, nor Danish, but as he thought best." By Harald's time, with more exposure to Scandinavians, the Anglo-Saxons doubtless adopted Norse shipbuilding designs and techniques. Longships on the Bayeux Tapestry, woven not long after 1066, show a very Viking design, but that might be due to Norman embroiderers rendering Norman ships, all descended from the Norse.

It is another tapestry that concerns us here, however – the one woven by the Fates, who must have here found the strand of Harald's life inextricably knotted to another's. For this ship came bearing his destiny, in the person of

Tostig Godwinson, the outcast Earl of Northumbria, brother to the King of England.

NOTES

1 This is not the same Thorolf Mostrarskegg who, decades earlier, founded a temple of Thor in western Iceland.

XXIX

ENGLAND

I, the famous stout king,
Won great glory through many victories.
I died a holy man
For having fallen on the fields of Norway.
I am not happy with this campaign.
I feel death lies in wait for you
And wolves will feast on your body.
God does not favor this venture.

St. Olaf

No image of Tostig Godwinson survives from life, but an illustration from the *Life of King Edward*, written and illustrated 200 years later by the French monk Matthew of Paris, portrays him as a dark-haired lad tussling with his brother Harold at a royal feast. In 1066 he was about forty years old, in the Anglo-Saxon fashion of the day clean-shaven except for a bristling mustache. "He was a tall, strong man," says the *Orkenyinga Saga*, "always scowling, a big talker, and warlike. He had few friends."

Tostig had even fewer friends when he appeared, with metaphorical hat in hand, in the court of King Harald of Norway that summer. Here was an earl without an earldom and a kingdom, according to Tostig, needing a rightful king. That his brother Harold was already seated on the throne was, he said, immaterial, for the king and his entire army were far away on England's southern coast, guarding against an anticipated invasion by Duke William of

Normandy. Except for a few youthful, inexperienced earls and their household forces, the whole north of England lay open for conquest. Tostig proposed nothing less than a military expedition to first retake his lost domain of Northumbria, and then unseat his brother Harold and claim his entire kingdom.

Harald viewed this all with skepticism. He had, in his view, his own rightful claim to the English throne through his nephew Magnus, to whom Hardaknut had promised it, and from whom (if Magnus had not handed England away like he had Denmark) Harald might have inherited it. But, having failed to conquer Denmark and Sweden and so recently pummeled Norway into submission, Harald was not eager to invest his army on another such campaign. Moreover, he doubted his men would be willing to fight across the sea in England, particularly if they were to simply hand over their conquest to Anglo-Saxons. According to *King Harald's Saga*, he told Tostig, "People say the English cannot be trusted."

Truth be told, the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy did have a reputation for duplicity. On the death of Knut in 1035, Tostig's father, Earl Godwin of Wessex, had invited the English claimant to the throne, Alfred Aetheling, from exile in Normandy, then betrayed him, slaughtered his men, and handed him over to Knut's son Harold Harefoot, who blinded the prince so cruelly that he died. When Harefoot's half-brother and successor Hardaknut died, the English *Witenagemot*, their assembly of nobles, repudiated his vow to hand the kingdom to Magnus of Norway, choosing instead Alfred's younger brother Edward the Confessor as king. Edward had cheated young Waltheof, son of Earl Siward of Northumbria, of his inheritance and named Tostig as earl in his place. Tostig ruled with such a heavy hand that while he was away on a hunt with Edward his subjects rebelled and invited young Morcar, brother of Earl Edwin of neighboring Mercia, to rule over them. When Edward dispatched Tostig's all-powerful brother Earl Harold of Wessex (called *Subregulus*, the Under-King, and *Dux Anglorum*, Duke of the English, in all but title ruler of England) to deal with the uprising, Harold not only confirmed Morcar and Edwin in their titles, but he married their sister and persuaded – forced – King Edward to banish Tostig. It was said the stress had caused Edward's fatal stroke that Yuletide of 1065, upon which Harold, with none to resist him, had taken the crown for himself, thereby reneging on his own oath to Duke William of Normandy that England would become his.

All in all, it was no surprise that Tostig had found no one to take him up on his offer of sharing the kingdom. The story goes that he was called *Trespjot*, Wooden Spear, because on learning that his brother Harold coveted an ornate metal-tipped spear belonging to King Edward, Tostig had taken the tip off his own spear, sharpened the shaft, and showed it to the king seeking sympathy, hoping Edward would award the ornate spear to him rather than his brother. The king relented but saw through the ruse and gave Tostig the nickname as well: "I suspect that whenever you meet someone of better means than yourself, you will never lack for envy."

Envy of his brother Harold had sent Tostig back and forth across the English Channel that spring, seeking retribution. But as he would prove later that year, Duke William did not need Tostig's help to launch an invasion of England. Tostig's brother-in-law, Baldwin V, Count of Flanders, also declined to join him, but provided a fleet of sixty ships, which Tostig crewed with his ragtag collection of pirates, mercenaries and marauders. He had harried the English coast from the Isle of Wight to Sandwich, but retreated before the approach of his brother's army. When he tried raiding along the Humber, Edwin and Morcar drove him back into the sea with just a dozen ships to his name, and most of his men lost as well through attrition and desertion. His former friends in Scotland turned their backs, and not even his kinsman, none other than King Svein Ulfsson of Denmark, was of any help. Tostig promised to support him if Svein would conquer England as had his uncle Knut, but Svein admitted that as a king he was not up to such achievements. He had barely managed to fend off Harald, and was sure the minute he left for England the King of Norway would finally steal Denmark from behind him.

So finally, out of friends and options, Tostig had ended up in Norway.

"If you wish to conquer England," he told Harald, "I can talk most of the lords there into becoming your comrades and allies. The only difference between me and my brother Harold is the title of king. It's well known that you are the greatest champion in the North, and I am surprised that you have spent fifteen years attempting to conquer Denmark, yet you hesitate to invade England, which is ripe for the taking."

Harald mulled it over with his advisors. Some, reminding him of his many great deeds as a warrior, thought the list should be topped off by a conquest of England. Others warned the country was larger and much better defended

than Denmark. The *thingmen*, the standing army once employed by English kings, no longer existed as a fighting force (the *heregeld*, the "army gold" required for their payment, was so exorbitant that it incited tax revolts; Edward the Confessor had wound down the unit and finally, in 1051, disbanded them), but the prowess of the English kings' housecarls was legendary. It was said any one of them was worth two Vikings.

In fact, though, many English housecarls were not Anglo-Saxon at all. They were Swedish, and Danish, and Norwegian – ex-Vikings, mercenaries like the Varangians, who simply liked to fight, went where the fighting was, and were willing to fight for any king who paid handsomely and treated them with respect. And according to the sagas, one of the greatest among them was well acquainted with King Harald.

Having once thought he had drowned young Heming Aslaksson and, when that proved wrong, having seen the boy off a cliff, Harald should have known better than to think him finally dead. Had he and his men looked up on leaving the Torghatten mountain, they might have spotted the lad hanging from the rock face.

According to Heming's *thattr*, the mini-saga written about him, the cloth of St. Stephen that Odd Ofeigsson had tied on him snagged on a protruding branch or stone, saving him from the drop. On coming to, half-delirious, he swore numerous oaths and vows to God – a pilgrimage to Rome, a donation to St. Stephen (to be held for his savior Odd, in order for him to make it) and a contribution to the Church of St. Olaf – in exchange for his life. That, and to be near King Harald at the moment of the tyrant's death.

Come night (again, as his story would have it), a bright light appeared above. Looking up, Heming perceived a man walking to the edge of the cliff, who reached down, took his hand and pulled him up to safety.

"I am St. Olaf," he said. "I do not wish your death to be on my brother's head. Carry out your oaths, but while King Harald lives you must take the name Leif. Your wish to witness his death is granted, but if you cause it I will see that you regret it. Now we must part."

With that Olaf rose toward heaven on a shaft of light worthy of a 1950s biblical movie. Heming, or as he would be called now, Leif – the name translates as "inheritor"; in taking it, Heming seems to be declaring himself

the recipient of the sainted Olaf's intent, the instrument of his will – made his way down the mountain and across the channel to home, where his family, at church mourning him, were overjoyed to see him walk in the door.

It was not safe, though, for him to remain within Harald's reach, and in the spring he made his departure. After completing his pilgrimage to Rome, he found his way to the court of England's King Edward, who recognized his abilities and took him into his service. Leif sent word to Odd that he was alive, and when the Icelander came to visit, returned the cloth of St. Stephen to him, along with enough money to found a church in the saint's honor, which Odd did at Midfjord, in northwest Iceland. Edward introduced Leif to Earl Harold Godwinson, whom, according to the story, Leif schooled in the arts of combat. When Edward and Harold went to war against an Earl Heinrek of Gloucester (though at that time no Earl Henry is known to history; that earldom itself was not created for another forty years) and the earl was killed in battle, Leif saw a kindred spirit in the earl's son, Helgi, rescued him from slavery and prevailed on the king to spare him. When King Edward died and Harold assumed the crown, Leif and Helgi Heinreksson remained at his side.

There's another story – that to finance the expedition to England Harald sent two men to Elisaveta to fetch a goatskin full of money he had left with her. When they returned with the money, the king asked if the queen had any opinion of the venture. She did, and doubtless because she knew Harald would appreciate it the more, she rendered it in verse:

> Cowardly Harald
> Will not sail west
> Over the sea
> With warships this spring.
> So the paralyzed king
> Will for all time
> Have nothing of
> England and glory.

Suffice to say Elisaveta's opinion of her king had deteriorated. No wonder

Harald had to send men to contact her – they were no longer together. (According to the sagas, the messengers had to go to Novgorod because Harald had left her in Rus. Since she had borne his two daughters in the interim, that is obviously incorrect, unless sometime afterward the king and queen finally split over his affair with Thora, and Elisif went home to Rus – in a Viking marriage, not very likely. By this time both her parents were dead, Queen Ingigerd in 1050 and Grand Prince Yaroslav in 1054. Even so, from Oslo to Novgorod and back again in the space of a few months before the fleet's departure seems a difficult journey to accomplish. More likely they only had to go from Oslo to Nidaros.)

Time had taken its toll. Certainly the king was not the spry champion of his youth. In 1066 Harald was fifty-one – by Norse standards, in those days of unremitting warfare, feuds and disease, an old man, one who had long since outlived his allotted span. That the skalds and sagas mention few of his wounds simply means none of them were crippling – it is inconceivable that, in his innumerable wars, Harald had collected no battle scars. It is conceivable, though, that his queen's doubt in him spurred the aging king to undertake a new invasion, just to spite her.[1] For whatever reason, in the end Harald couldn't resist Tostig's offer. Snorri just says, "He, too, longed to conquer new realms."

"Tostig swore an oath of loyalty to King Harald," relates the *Morkinskinna*, "promising the king his aid and assistance in their invasion of England. King Harald swore in return that Tostig would rule that land, and that he would have power in accordance with territory they won there."

Not all the king's men were enthusiastic about this campaign. Ulf *Stallari* Ospaksson, Harald's brother-in-law, oldest friend and longtime marshal, was reluctant to take part. Over the years he would certainly have heard of the ferocity of the Anglo-Saxon housecarls. He told a lady of the court, "There's no point in the king's marshals taking ship, madam, if two of us are to flee before every Englishman. In my day gold was won more easily. Things were different then."

Ulf was no longer up to his old exploits. In fact, even as preparations were being made for the invasion, he died. It is said that as Harald turned away from his grave, he remarked, "There lies the most loyal and trustworthy vassal a nobleman ever had."

Appointing one Styrkar (“Strengthener”) as his new *stallari*, the king called up the army and assembled a fleet, not counting supply and transport boats, of 200 longships. Not as large as the force he’d taken to battle Svein at the Nisa River, but then he had sent half that fleet home early. To deal with Anglo-Saxon housecarls would require more than mere militia, and only Norway’s most elite troops boarded ships for England. Besides the Northumbrians and other English allies Tostig claimed would muster to his banner on landing, Harald planned to recruit more along the way from his fiefdoms in the Orkneys and Scotland.

Perhaps to avoid leaving trouble behind him at home, the king separated his families. Snorri, following the *Orkneyinga Saga*, said he took his first wife and children with him: Elisaveta, Ingigerd and Maria. According to the *Morkinskinna*, Thora and Maria went with him; in the *Fagrskinna*, it is Elisaveta and Maria. All the chroniclers agree, at least, that Maria would accompany her father as far as the Orkneys. For her it would be a kind of pre-honeymoon, for prior to their departure Harald had betrothed her to Thora’s brother Eystein Thorbergsson, called Orri, “the Gorcock.” (Yes, that would make Orri Harald’s brother-in-law and son-in-law. Vikings did not concern themselves with such trivialities.) Maria was nineteen, and of course said to be the fairest girl in Norway. And Eystein had become, aside from his sister Thora, the king’s favorite of all the Arnason clan.

As for the princes of Norway, the chroniclers agree that Olaf would follow Harald to England, and that Magnus stayed behind. This might have been because of the undue stress his impetuous elder son had caused Harald on their last few campaigns, but also because Harald had a premonition that he might not return. Unlike on those prior campaigns, he took the unprecedented step of designating Magnus, then just seventeen or eighteen years old, as regent, to rule Norway in his stead until his return.

Premonitions were rife in the Norwegian camp. A man on the king’s ship dreamed he saw ravens and eagles perched on every prow, with an ogress on the horizon eager to butcher the men for them. Another dreamed of two armies lined up for battle when a troll woman rode between them on a giant wolf with a man in its bloodstained jaws, and as soon as it gulped him down the woman snatched up another warrior to feed it, until it had eaten them all. Harald himself dreamed that St. Olaf visited him in the night, admonishing him that he would die on this adventure, and that God was not on his side.

Tostig was of the opinion that Harald's dream was the product of English sorcery. But before the fleet sailed, the king went to Olaf's shrine in Nidaros, where miracles were still said to occur, and where Harald perhaps hoped for a sign of his dead brother's blessing. In the end he opened the tomb and trimmed Olaf's hair and nails (which were thought by the ancients to continue growing after death). Then he closed the tomb, locked it and threw the key in the river.

The jarldom of Orkney was a veritable maritime empire, reaching from Dublin in the south to the Shetland Islands in the north, including the Hebrides and large parts of the kingdoms of Alba and Moray in modern Scotland. Its capital was at Birgisherad, modern Birsay, on the north coast of Mainland, the largest island in the archipelago. The site is dominated by the Brough (Fort) of Birsay, a long, low, cliff-faced tidal island about 800 feet offshore, which at low tide connects to the main island by a narrow natural causeway. Such limited access often made tidal islands natural religious sites and fortresses, and the Brough was no exception. Uninhabited, it still bears the remains of Norse settlements and even those of the prehistoric Picts whom they displaced. The Norse site has been partially eroded by wave action and in its day was probably exposed to North Atlantic winter storms. *Jarl* Thorfinn's hall, until recently believed to have stood on the Brough, is now thought to have been sited somewhere on Mainland, probably near St. Magnus Church, named for Saint Magnus Erlendsson (called Magnus the Martyr, Earl of Orkney, circa 1106–15) and raised on the site of the original Christchurch built by *Jarl* Thorfinn in 1064, just in time. Thorfinn, who had ordered the death of his co-*jarl* Rognvald Brusason (which Harald had forgiven; he and Thorfinn were both married to Arnason women), had died in 1065 and been succeeded by his sons Paul (Pall) and Erlend. They still owed fealty to Harald as their king, so their domain was to be his first stop.

"Paul, the oldest, ruled for both of them," says the *Orkneyinga Saga*. "They did not divide their jarldom, for they almost always agreed." The young *jarls*' age in 1066 is uncertain, but they are thought to be about the age of Harald's daughters – late teens or early twenties – and some historians assert he went there to size them up as potential marital partners. As has been seen, though, both Ingigerd and Maria were already betrothed, and what Harald most likely

wanted from the young *jarls* was a demonstration of loyalty. Paul and Erlend were apparently eager to prove themselves to their overlord. In the wake of their father's death, some of the further regions of his dominion were threatening to break away, and they would need Harald's support to lock them down. For now, both signed on to his expedition. The addition of Orcadian and Hebridean troops brought the total invasion force to about 300 ships, but perhaps as many as 500, with at least 9,000 men, perhaps 12,000, and by some analyses as many as 18,000.

It had been almost two and three-quarters centuries since the Vikings had first attacked England, at Lindisfarne Priory in Northumbria. Two hundred years since the Danes, Swedes and Norwegians of the Great Heathen Army landed in East Anglia and headed north to take the Anglo-Saxon city of Eoforwic (old Roman Eboracum, and before that, Celtic Eburakon, "place of the yew trees") and renamed it Jorvik. A hundred and twelve years since the Saxons expelled the city's last Viking king, Eric Bloodaxe. Seventy-five years since Svein Forkbeard's Danes defeated the English at Maldon; fifty-three since Svein had forced Aethelred the Unready off the English throne and taken it for himself. Fifty-two since Harald's brother Olaf had pulled down London Bridge, allowing Aethelred to retrieve the throne from Svein's son Knut; fifty-one since Knut returned with a fleet of 200 longships and 10,000 men to finally make England part of his North Sea Empire. The decades since Knut's death had been a dark age among the Vikings, when they had given up their dreams of empire for decades of infighting to a bloody standstill.

All that was to be finished now. At the minimum, Harald's fleet was half again as large as the one with which Knut had conquered the Anglo-Saxons. One way or the other, the King of Norway intended his to be the last Viking invasion of England.

This would not be a family excursion like the battle of the Nisa. Leaving his womenfolk behind in Orkney, where they could easily be fetched down to his new dominion once the fighting was over, Harald and Olaf led their fleet down the eastern coast of Scotland. Here they linked up with Tostig, who had likewise been drumming up more recruits from his friend King Malcolm III, and who had brought along his own son Skuli, just fourteen. Their combined

forces proceeded to land at Kliflond (Cliff Land, modern Cleveland in North Yorkshire). The villages there – Orm, Steinn, Malti, Toll and Mydilsburgh (Ormesby, Stainsby, Maltby and Tollesby, now suburbs of modern Middlesbrough on the Tees River) – were more Norse than English and submitted to the invaders without resistance. From Mydilsburgh it was possible to see, about seven miles to the southeast, the distinctive sugarcone peak of Roseberry Topping, over a thousand feet high.

Harald is said to have asked Tostig, "What is that mountain called?"

Tostig said, "Not every hill in England has a name."

"But this one must. Tell me."

Tostig said, "It is said to be the burial mound of Ivar the Boneless."[2]

Harald brooded, "Few men who have seen Ivar's grave have gone on to conquer England."

It's a small but telling scene, demonstrating Harald's almost morose pessimism concerning this venture. Tostig, on the other hand, was working hard to disregard every omen, this time scoffing, "It is no more than superstition to believe that."

From Cleveland the fleet moved forty miles down the coast to Skardaborg, Skardi's Fort, named for its 10th-century founder, Thorgils Skardi ("the Hare-Lipped"). Today's Scarborough, its two bays are separated by a rocky promontory, dominated by the ruins of a 12th-century castle. In 1066 little stood there other than the remains of an Iron Age settlement, an old Roman signal station, and a small chapel. The fort in question is thought to have been a palisaded ditch, encircling a modest town of perhaps fifty homesteads clustered below the south side of the headland. The villagers here were decidedly English, and put up a stiffer fight than anyone expected. Until, that is, the Norwegians took the high ground on the promontory and began lofting firebrands from it, down onto their thatched roofs. Apparently there were no little birds to trap, as in Sicily, and set alight on their way home.

"One building after another caught fire," wrote Snorri. "The whole town went up in flames. The Norwegians slew many, and looted everything they could lay hands on. The English had no choice but to submit to King Harald." The destruction of Scarborough, though unremarked in the contemporary English chronicles, is memorialized to this day among the locals.

The invaders' strategy may have been no more complicated than reaping

whatever loot and striking whatever fear could be accomplished along the way, but the main goal may also have been to draw the Northumbrians and their Mercian allies toward the coast and away from the city of York, and then circle around them. From Scarborough a valley route leads directly – via Stamford Bridge – to the capital, but marching overland was not the Viking way when a water route, even if roundabout, was available. The next stop, therefore, was another seventy miles down the coast at Holderness, the mouth of the Humber estuary. According to Snorri and the *Orkneyinga Saga*, on landing the Norse met a reception committee of English troops and vanquished them. The site of any such battle is unknown and probably does not exist anymore, as over the centuries since the North Sea has taken more ground there than Harald did, inflicting the highest rate of erosion in Europe – some three miles of coast lost since Roman times, and over twenty towns washed away just since the 19th century. The coastline in Harald's day was probably over a mile further out to sea than it is today.

Rounding the spit of Ravenspurn (modern Spurn Head island), the Viking fleet turned into the Humber. This estuary divides Northumbria – "North of the Humber" – from Lincolnshire to the south, and is fed in part by the Ouse River. (The name derives from the Celtic *udso*, water, and is a common name; there are four Ouse rivers in England. Nowadays it is pronounced "ooze," but in Old English it rhymed with "mouse.")

Now came the tricky part. When the tide rises, the funnel-like Humber generates an immense bore – an inflow rising so high that it actually overcomes the force of its feed rivers, causing them to reverse course and run upstream. In the Humber, at its widest seven miles across, the change amounts only to a rise of inches in sea level, moving at just three to five knots, though enough to churn treacherous, muddy whirlpools and ever-shifting sandbars. However, where the Humber forks into the Trent River and the Ouse River, about forty miles from its mouth and thirty miles downstream from York, the change is neither gradual nor small. The bore becomes a wave up to four feet high, surging upriver as fast as nine knots.[3] The effect is greatest at the equinoxes in April and September – in 1066, within a few days of the arrival of the Norwegian fleet. For the invaders this presented a great opportunity, but also a great challenge to their boating skills, because if the fleet could catch the inrushing bore on the Ouse they could ride it all the way

upriver to York.

Snorri makes it sound like nothing – “King Harald sailed up the Humber and up the river and landed there” – but it was in no way that simple. Because of the downstream pressure of the river (together the Ouse and the Trent drain a fifth of all England into the Humber), the change in flow does not follow the normal six-hour cycle of tides. On the Ouse, the bore runs upstream for four hours until overcome by the river current, which then runs back down for eight. Boating such a surge might even have been beyond veteran Norwegian seafarers, but here Tostig managed to prove his worth. He had lived ten years in the North. He and his rebel Northumbrians were familiar with the bore, and how to best exploit it.

To feed the fleet into the mouth of the Ouse, which in its upper reaches toward York is only wide enough for oared longships to travel single-file, would require them to pre-position in the Humber prior to the rise of the tide. Harald’s big *drakkar* would be in the lead, where it could bear the maximum number of troops to any contested landing. A trained eye would spot the surge coming up the estuary. As it passed the oarsmen would dig in and pull hard, and the ship rode forward precisely like a surfer catching a wave.[4] As the bore entered the Ouse it gained height and speed, yet the Vikings, using its momentum, only had to pull hard enough to maintain steerage, marveling and laughing as the riverbanks swept past faster than a man could trot. The captains would bark at the rowers to pay attention and wheel the ships about in the turns, and the steersmen had tricky work in the meandering course, sweeping their oars to keep their prows straight, for a moment’s lapse in control meant disaster. If a boat caught a sandbar or overran a bank it risked grounding, getting turned round in the current, rolling and swamping or even capsizing, in which case all the boats coming behind would run it over. The chronicles record no such losses, though – a credit to Norse seamanship – and in just three hours or so the lead ships covered the twenty-seven miles to the landing site.

At Riccall, some ten miles south of York, the Ouse makes a sharp U-turn. In Harald’s day it left an oxbow in the surrounding marsh where the longships could pull off and beach, the fens providing protection from attack. Over the next hour the brunt of the fleet came ashore, though the trailing boats, including most of the slower support vessels, probably never got

started in time. With the next bore coming at night – too treacherous to attempt – they would have taken the one after that, and arrived twenty-four hours after the initial landing.

Meanwhile the Norwegians scouted the surrounding terrain. Just a short way to the east a road ran up from the south toward York. Continuing on the water meant being slaves to the tide and current, arriving at a predictable time, feeding ships one by one into the enemy's reach, where the stream was so narrow they would be easy pickings for archers firing from cover on both banks. Compared to that, a ten-mile march was nothing.

There was no hurry. The invaders' speedy trip inland gave them a cushion in time against interference from the south. They could only assume that after their attacks along the coast, messengers had sped southward to alert the English king, Harold II.

In fact, it was probably that very day, September 19, when word arrived in London that, whether or not an invasion was coming from Normandy, it had already come from Norway. The Vikings had returned to England.

Historians ponder why the earls Edwin of Mercia and Morcar of Northumbria sought battle with the invaders. Unlike Scarborough, York had real walls, built of stone by Roman legionaries who knew a thing or two about defense.[5] Behind those walls the earls, their fyrdmen and housecarls could simply have waited out the invaders until King Harold came up from the south to their rescue.

To recall the royal army, organize it and march it the length of England, however, might take weeks, and for all Edwin and Morcar knew, Harold might never come. The king and his troops had been waiting all summer along the south coast for the anticipated invasion by William of Normandy. Finally convinced the duke would not come at all that year (because the Normans, unlike their Norse forebears, were poor seafarers, especially in winter gales), on September 8 Harold had released his own *fyrd*, the farmers and peasants who were anxious to get home to their fields for the all-important harvest.

And that is probably the very reason the northern earls came out seeking battle as well. Morcar had mustered about 3,000 men, and Edwin had brought perhaps 1,500, and mostly not housecarls but fyrdmen, farmers whose own

fields and orchards were ripe for harvest. Instead of taking in their crops, they were cooped up in town, eating up the city stocks. That couldn't go on forever. In 1066 the harvest moon – the first full moon after the fall equinox – was just a few weeks away, in the first days of October. A siege that went on much longer than that meant grain, fruit and vegetables going to rot or, worse, into the bellies of the invaders. The issue had to be decided quickly.

Also, the earls had driven Tostig back into the Humber once already, when he and his brigands had first come plundering up from the south that spring. Now he had Vikings on his side, but the English disadvantage in numbers could be offset by a wise choice of defensive position.

And so it was that, on September 20, as Harald, Tostig and their army crested a rise near where the Ouse curved back toward the York road, forming a choke point against the marshes at Fulford, they saw the banners of Mercia and Northumbria fluttering in the morning light, and beneath them an Anglo-Saxon shield wall a quarter-mile across, barring their path.

And no one on that field could know that, on that very same Wednesday morning, 200 miles away and only a day after receiving word of the Viking invasion, King Harold II of England and his entire Anglo-Saxon army had set out from London on the road to York.

NOTES

1 It should be pointed out that one of the primary roles of women in the sagas is as instigators, goading their men into actions they might not otherwise take. The chroniclers may have assigned this role to Elisaveta.

2 Actually Ivar, son of Ragnar Lodbrok and onetime King of Jorvik, died and was buried in an unknown location. Roseberry Topping is a natural sandstone cap that formed a peak when the softer shales and clays around it eroded away. But Ivar's death was 200 years in the past, and neither Tostig nor Harald knew better.

3 The word *bore* comes from the Old Norse *bara*, wave, but Yorkshire locals have their own very Viking name for the phenomenon: Aegir, after the Norse sea-giant whose nine daughters are the various types of waves.

4 Tidal bores can be surfed – the bore on the Severn River between western England and Wales can reach seven feet in height and has been surfed over 7½ miles inland – but the idea here was not to ride the breaker but rather simply to go with the current, upstream instead of down.

5 It was actually the IX Legion, posted in York in the year AD 306, that had first declared their commander Flavius Valerius Aurelius Constantinus emperor on the death of his father, the Western emperor Constantius I. Flavius, as Constantine the Great, would go on to become the first Christian emperor of Rome and the founder of Constantinople.

PART FOUR

Fatal Choosers of the Slaughter,
O'er you hovers Odin's daughter;
Hear the choice she spreads before ye –
Victory, and wealth, and glory;
Or old Valhalla's roaring hail,
Her ever-circling mead and ale,
Where for eternity unite
The joys of wassail and of fight.
Headlong forward, foot and horsemen,
Charge and fight, and die like Norsemen!

Sir Walter Scott

XXX

Stamford Bridge

The great king,
Who never feared danger in his life,
Ordered the advance ashore
With a small force.
But a mighty host marched
From the south through England
To oppose the eminent ruler.
Battle began at once.

Arnor Thordarson

The forced march by Harold II of England and his army from London to York in September of 1066 – 200 miles in four or five days – is one of the greatest feats of military tactics in medieval history. Normally the journey took more like two weeks, assuming the roads were in good shape. (Though it must be said the road from London to York, straight and paved, had been built by the Romans a millennium before to facilitate just such quick troop movements.) To reassemble the army after he had released it, and to put it on the road within twenty-four hours or so, was an achievement in itself; in all probability Harold set out with little more than his mounted housecarls, recruiting his *fyrd* anew from the villages along the way. To push thousands of men, on foot, many in full armor, day and night to what might well be their deaths, required an extraordinary degree of leadership. Later Norman writers disparaged the last Anglo-Saxon monarch as a dishonorable oath-breaker for

denying Duke William's claim to the throne, but only a king beloved by his men could have compelled them on that march.

The English approached York from the west of the Ouse, far from the Viking landing at Riccall, and arrived in the village of Tadcaster, about ten miles southwest of the city, on Sunday night, the eve of the rendezvous for the hostage exchange. Locals must have reported where the Viking fleet lay beached, and Harold might logically have chosen to strike at the ships. Yet they were protected by a natural moat of river, swamp and bog, and if it came to victory for the English, leaving the invaders' fleet intact would give them a quick way off the island, which after all was the ultimate goal. On Monday morning, September 25, the gates of York being thrown open – and the citizens presumably having regained their courage and seen the small Norwegian garrison imprisoned or killed – the Anglo-Saxon army marched through the city toward Stamford Bridge.

On its approach, Harald and Tostig were not in a position to appreciate the English king's accomplishment. For once the King of Norway had been caught utterly flat-footed. Historians call it fatal overconfidence, and that undoubtedly had something to do with it. Harald had won too many battles to believe he could be defeated. Even at the time, all thought him so invincible that anything less than victory was attributed to sorcery.

According to the story,[1] on the advance to York an English woman came into the Norwegian camp asking for King Harald, to whom she offered the gift of a fine tent.

Tostig, ever untrusting, advised, "Take the tent and burn it later."

Harald told him, "Burn that which is given to you. I haven't noticed your countrymen giving you any gifts to show their respect." He had the tent raised, and it was more splendid than the Norwegians had ever seen. Harald asked the woman what she would have in return.

"I have two sons," she said, "and I would like to know they will both be spared."

Her identity was not recorded, but she was obviously a lady of means to afford such property – tents were a comfort for the rich, as commoners had better use for their gold – and the fact that she claimed two sons indicates she might well have been the little-known Aelfgifu, widow of the late Earl Aelfgar of Mercia, daughter-in-law of the famous Lady Godiva and mother

of both Edwin of Mercia and Morcar of Northumbria.

Harald assured her that if her sons and property fell into his hands, they were safe, which goes a long way to explaining the mercy he showed to the earls and their earldom. Nevertheless, having spent a night in the tent, on rising Harald admitted to his skald Thjodolf that Tostig might have been right and the tent was bewitched, “for to this point I have had seven plans for every contingency, but now I cannot decide what course to take.”

Tyrannical, foul-mouthed, womanizing and greedy the King of Norway was, but one thing he had never been was indecisive. The scene seems to be retold specifically to explain why Harald ended up in the predicament he did at Stamford Bridge.

Loyal Thjodolf assured the king: “Nevertheless, we will follow your orders.” And so the Norwegians had. After the decisive triumph over Edwin and Morcar at Fulford, the complete capitulation of York, and especially the Sunday night victory celebration in the Viking camp at Riccall, such worries were forgotten. Harald, as in the olden days, was again the invincible King of the Norse, no longer battling other Vikings to a fruitless standstill but once more reaping riches and wreaking terror and devastation on hapless foreigners, in the finest tradition of Ragnar Lodbrok, Svein Forkbeard and Knut the Great himself.

But it may be that it was all those years of battling other Vikings, and seeing on the other hand how easily English fyrdmen were defeated, that restored Harald’s fatal overconfidence. A bleary-eyed hangover does not excuse the lack of sentries posted on the road from London, or even from York, who might have warned of the English army’s improbable approach. Only Tostig questioned why Harald left a third of his army behind at Riccall that morning, or why the remainder, even considering the summer heat, were permitted to set aside their armor prior to the march. Even the king had left his famous, impervious mail coat, Emma, in camp. As they looked across the Derwent upon King Harold’s English host, however, the folly of that overconfidence was sickeningly plain. Harald, Tostig and their men were not only heavily outnumbered, but utterly unprepared for a fight.

Harald, ever the warrior poet, put a brave face on things. He composed a verse:

We go forth

In battle ranks,
Without armor,
Beneath dark sword-blades.
Helmets gleam.
I do not have my mail.
Now our armor lies
Down by the ships.

Not exactly inspiring words from a leader expecting men to follow him into combat. Warriors fight in spite of a lack of armor, not because of it. The king knew better. “That was not a very good verse,” he admitted, “and I shall compose a better one.”

We do not bend the knee in battle,
The woman commanded me,
Or crouch behind the shield
Because of the crash of weapons.
She told me once
To hold my head high
In the din of battle
Where swords and skulls meet.

To fight for the woman left behind has been a common inspiration for warriors through the ages. We might, however, question which woman Harald had in mind. Elisaveta, the wife who seemingly had scolded him into this conquest? Thora, the wife whose son now reigned in Harald’s place and was assured of her position even if her husband was killed? Or Maria, the daughter named for Harald’s long-lost love, both of whom still awaited him, one in the Orkneys and one, he might hope, beyond the pall of darkness.

Seven feet of English ground.

The exact sequence of events of the battle of Stamford Bridge varies from one telling to another, particularly between the English and Scandinavian accounts. None of the authors actually participated in the fighting, and most were writing years, decades or centuries after the event. That leaves

historians to re-shuffle the reports into their most logical, most natural progression. By that reasoning, after those first, failed negotiations between King Harold of England and his brother Tostig, the two sides parted, preparing themselves for the combat that must now be fought.

The Vikings were in a bad spot. Three riders had been dispatched to fetch the rest of the army from the fleet anchorage at Riccall. Until it arrived, the Norwegians' task was simply to survive. Their only advantage was that they held both sides of the Derwent, and most crucially the footbridge between. The bridge had been built at Stamford because the river there was no longer fordable – at least, not by armored men and horses. The banks were steep, and the bottom was probably six to eight feet below the surface.

To win, the English had to cross the bridge before Norwegian reinforcements arrived.

To survive, the Norwegians had to hold the bridge until the reinforcements arrived.

According to English accounts, as Tostig and the negotiating party withdrew over the river, Harald posted a vanguard to block the bridge to the English. Only a small detachment was necessary – in fact, a small detachment *was* necessary; in the tight confines of the bridge too many men would simply get in each other's way. Harald chose his best champions or, perhaps, simply those few who had deigned to wear armor on that hot day. It was a cruel reward for having thought ahead and taken no chances, for theirs was practically a suicide mission.

The three riders sent to Riccall had no doubt taken off from Stamford at a gallop, but even the best of horses – and the Vikings had chosen their three best – can only maintain such a pace for a mile or two. If their riders were smart, as soon as they were out of sight they slowed to an easy canter, which can be maintained over much longer distances, at a dozen or more miles per hour.[2] So within an hour or so of leaving Stamford, in early to mid-afternoon, they arrived at the landing.

Much more critical this day would be the speed and distance a man could run, in full armor, carrying a sword and shield.

Prince Olaf, the young Orkney *jarls* Paul and Erlend, and Tostig's son Skuli remained, probably against their will, with the ships. Eystein Orri, the marshal Styrkar and other minor lords might have had horses, but most of

their men would have to make the return trip to Stamford on foot. To load their gear on any captured wagons would take time the Vikings did not have; for all they knew, their king was already being overrun. They would have to wear or carry everything. A mail hauberk might weigh twenty-five pounds, and whether or not a sword (perhaps four pounds) and shield (fifteen pounds) were carried or strapped on, they threw off a runner's stride.

Times change, but the demand on soldiers does not. Candidates for the United States Army Ranger regiment earn the right through a grueling qualification process, including a forced "ruck march": pulling on fifty pounds of gear in a rucksack and marching a dozen miles at a pace of about fifteen minutes per mile. Harald's men were not all of such elite caliber, but they were accustomed to hardship, and by this we can estimate that it would be a minimum of three hours until they could reach the battlefield – four hours or more since the messengers had left and the battle commenced.

The Vikings at the bridge over the Derwent sold their lives dearly. Clustered close around the bridgehead, even crouched down behind a miniature shield wall, they were sitting ducks for the legendary English archers. Their shields of linden, alder or poplar (oak is stiffer, but heavier, and splits more easily) stopped most of the arrows, but any man who raised a helmeted head over his shield rim took his life in his own hands. The archers, unopposed, would have moved up to point-blank range, and judging by King Harold's tactics in the coming battle, the English also sent horsemen into javelin range. A shield bristling with arrows could still be used, but one transfixed by a spear could not, and a shield pulled down by such unbalanced weight exposed its bearer to arrows. Eventually enough Vikings fell that their shield wall sundered, and the Anglo-Saxon housecarls moved in for the kill.

According to the English accounts, there followed an episode of legendary heroism unmatched in ancient chronicles since that of the Roman Horatius Cocles some 1,600 years earlier, when he singlehandedly defended a bridge in Rome from the invading Etruscans. Most intriguingly, the scene appears as an addendum to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, but in only one of its multiple editions. The copy at Abingdon Abbey, now in Oxfordshire, was compiled not long after the battle at Stamford Bridge, but like the others originally did not include this scene. Sometime in the 12th century an unknown scribe felt it

worthy of inclusion, and inserted it on a separate page of its own, beginning, “The Norwegians fled before the enemy, but one stood firm, preventing them from crossing the bridge or clinching victory.”

As William of Malmesbury, the half-Norman, half-English abbot and historian born about thirty years after the battle at Stamford and writing about it some sixty years or so after the fact, heard it, “However hard it is to believe, for some time a single Norwegian halted the advance of so many great men. Standing on the entrance of the bridge, which is called Standford Brigge [*sic*], killing several of our warriors, he prevented the rest from crossing over.”

And Archdeacon Henry of Huntingdon, writing about ninety years after the battle, recounted, “A single Norwegian, whose name should have been remembered, posted himself on a bridge and, chopping down more than forty English with a battle-axe, his country’s weapon, halted the advance of the whole English army.”

Whether this unknown Viking slew forty of the enemy himself, or was simply credited with the entire body count, does not lessen his feat. The footbridge was easily narrow enough to be covered by the swing of a Dane axe nearly as tall as a man, sharp enough to hew through mail, and heavy enough to cleave shields and helms, break swords and shear off limbs and heads. Butchered men piled at his feet or tumbled over the rails into the water. At some point even the English housecarls, themselves expert axemen, drew back to offer quarter.

“Given the chance to surrender, and being assured that a man of such bravery could expect the greatest mercy from the English,” wrote William, “he ridiculed those who tried to bargain with him, and instead, with grim expression, scorned the cowards who were unable to overcome one man.”

By this time the English knew better than to send any more men to face this Viking, who fully intended to die where he stood. To oblige him required less manly tactics. William recounted, “None going any nearer, as they thought it unwise to come to grips with a man who had adamantly refused every chance of survival, one of the king’s warriors aimed a javelin at him from a distance, and transfixed him as he was boasting about, heedless of his safety, so that he conceded victory to the English.”

The other accounts ascribe to the hero an even less noble end.

As Archdeacon Henry put it, “Finally someone went under the bridge in a

boat, and stuck a spear up into him through a gap the planks," and the anonymous scribe in the Abingdon *Chronicle* concurred that someone "went under the bridge and stabbed him under his coat of mail."

The tragedy of it is that the Norwegian's name is lost to history, but thanks to a few English monks, we remember his deeds. It might come as a surprise that his heroism does not even appear in any Scandinavian accounts of the battle, but that is easily explained. Most of the Norwegians who witnessed it did not live to tell the tale.

Across the river, King Harald had made the most of the delay. He had formed his line on the slope rising some hundred feet from the river to the crest now rather incongruously named Battle Flats. This move is questioned by some modern armchair tacticians, according to whom the spot to defend the Norwegian side of the river was not upslope from the bank, giving the English time and room to cross and reform, but right at the foot of the bridge, where their vast numbers could only trickle across by twos or threes. This ignores that the English crossing the bridge could only be engaged by a few of the Norwegians at a time: those closest to the mouth of the bridge. If, as Harald had been warned, any one housecarl was worth two of his *thegns*, then such a close-quarters fight might very well go against the few Norwegians within reach of it. And if the Anglo-Saxons succeeded in breaking through at the bridgehead, a Viking line along the riverbank – all the while within easy bow range from the opposite side – would be cut in two, outflanked and defeated piecemeal.

But Harald did not have to defeat the entire English army. As he had when overmatched by the Danes at the battle of the Nisa, he only had to defeat its best soldiers.

It should be remembered that although the totals are uncertain, most of the English army at Stamford Bridge, as at Fulford, was of the *fyrd*, poorly armed and armored peasantry. Only the smaller fraction were the formidable housecarls, and they were almost certainly outnumbered by Vikings – likewise a fraction of their total force, but all hard-bitten, veteran champions, fresh off a victory over just such Englishmen. That Harald did not have his men form the *svinfylking*, the boar-snout fighting wedge his brother Olaf had employed at Stiklestad, and send them plunging downhill to attack, shows

that he had learned a thing or two since then. Better to entice those heavily armored English, wearied by what had to have been a forced march, to climb the hill and spend themselves against a shield wall. After that, mopping up the fyrdmen would be mere amusement, especially after the practice the Vikings had just enjoyed at Fulford.

"King Harald arranged his troops in a battle line long but not especially deep," recounted Snorri – a good description of a shield wall comprised of the minimum amount of men. He continued his account:

> Then he curved the wings around until they met, forming a circle of even depth, shield to shield all the way around, and the same overhead. The king and his *thegns* stood inside the circle along with his flag. Tostig and his men joined him there under the *jarl*'s banner. The king ordered that they and their men should move into the line to wherever they were most needed.

Shields held overhead would protect against enemy archers, and the circular formation left no weak spots for the enemy to exploit. "The army was arrayed in this manner," explained Snorri, "because King Harald knew that cavalry attacked in small increments before immediately wheeling away."

Like Vikings, Anglo-Saxons are not generally thought to have employed cavalry at all in battle. That they are said to have used them at Stamford Bridge leads some historians to think the scribes confused that battle with Hastings, where it was Norman knights charging uphill. Yet there is a standing stone in the yard of a church in Aberlemno, Scotland, dated to the mid-9th century and carven on one side with a depiction of a battle with horsemen encircling infantry. Though different interpretations abound, the consensus is that the men on foot are Picts, and the mounted troops Anglo-Saxon Northumbrians. English *thegns* and housecarls definitely rode horses on the march, and King Harold had spent time on the Continent among the Normans and even fighting at Duke William's side, where he no doubt familiarized himself with cavalry tactics. Faced with a Norwegian shield wall, he evidently decided not to play King Harald's game, wasting his infantry in breaking it, for he surely knew he was not facing the entire force of invaders and that his numbers would be needed against the inevitable arrival of enemy reinforcements. Instead he would try to use the speed and maneuverability of his horsemen to disassemble the shield wall from a safe distance. He may have assumed that he was facing an ordinary Viking commander, who had never fought any other than the Danes, on foot. But that was not Harald of Norway.

“Our archers will be inside with us,” Harald ordered of his fighting circle. “Those in the front rank should set the butts of their spears in the ground, aiming the points at the riders’ chests if they charge us, and those in the second rank should aim theirs at the chests of the horses.”

Horses will refuse to throw themselves on a hedge of spears, a fact well known to the ancients. Such tactics had gone in and out of fashion since the phalanxes of Alexander the Great, and in employing them Harald anticipated the revival of the Scottish *schiltrons*, shield-troops, that stood off the English invasions of the 13th century, and the massive pike blocks that marched back and forth over Europe from the late 1400s well into the 1600s.

Still, the Fates, fiercely spinning out the strand of Harald’s life, came back around to that inextricable tie with his brother Olaf’s at Stiklestad, thirty-six years and a few odd weeks earlier: a king of the east, come to conquer the west and holding the high ground, only to find the people rising against him and a third of his army nowhere in sight. On the slope above Stamford Bridge, Harald must have kept one eye on the sun to make sure it did not start going out.

“Then the Englishmen gave out their war cry,” records the *Heimskringla*. (For the Anglo-Saxons that was either “God Almighty!” or “Holy Cross!”)

“The English rode at the Norwegians,” recounts the *Morkinskinna*, “only to meet that impenetrable defense. The way the spears were set, the horses could not get past them.” The cavalry thundered around the circular, spear-bristling Viking shield wall but could neither find a break in it, nor inflict one.

“Both sides fought with the greatest ferocity, and at first suffered few casualties,” admitted Snorri.

Amid the swirling dust, the yelling and screaming, and the clatter of spears and arrows on shields, Harald could not have avoided recalling his fighting in Rus against Pecheneg horsemen, and against the bandits in the Holy Land, when circles just such as this had proven impervious. “King Harald warned his men not to fight rashly,” the chroniclers tell us, “but to hold the line and not panic.”

“The fighting was sporadic while the Norwegians maintained the proper formation,” claims the *Heimskringla*, “with Englishmen charging hard and withdrawing as soon as they saw they had achieved nothing.”

As would be relearned in centuries to come – at least, until the advent of gunpowder – the only effective attack against a shield wall bristling with spears was with infantry, especially with the advantage of numbers. King Harold sent his housecarls up the hill to do their worst.

"There was such a large difference in numbers," recounts the *Morkinskinna*, "that the English, engaging the Norwegians, surrounded them, and attacked from all sides. As might be expected, men began to fall."

Round the circle of the shield wall, Dane axes rose and fell, swords hewed, shields splintered, spears pierced chain mail. Limbs and heads went spinning, trailing crimson streams. Cursing, screaming men slipped and stumbled on the red-slicked, corpse-strewn hilltop, their feet tangled in the bodies and guts of the fallen, battle madness numbing the pain of horrific wounds and overcoming the dizzying loss of blood.

The Norwegians refused to break. With their king and his English earl surrounded as they were by the hedge of spears, the Anglo-Saxon riders and housecarls could not get within a sword's swing of them. The battle had been going on for the better part of the afternoon.

Down the slope at the riverbank, according to the saga of Heming Aslaksson, King Harold turned to him and Helgi Heinreksson. "What must we do to break the shield wall? Their reinforcements will arrive soon, and then our attack will be even more difficult, since it is not even going well now, when they don't have all their men."

"We must attack," advised Helgi, "as boldly as we can, and if that fails, then we will retreat, and maybe they will think we flee. Then they will break ranks and chase us, and we will immediately turn round and attack."

Feigned retreat was the same tactic Harald had used at Fulford against the Northumbrian lords Edwin and Morcar. As he had learned fighting in Sweden against *Jarl* Hakon, however, Norsemen were no less susceptible. After a hard fight, seeing the enemy fall back brings on an overpowering urge to pursue and finish them off.

On their king's signal, the English retreated, and much as Harald must have cursed them, some of the Vikings felt certain the time had come for victory. They broke out of the shield wall and gave chase down the slope. As soon as they were sufficiently separated, however, the English horsemen wheeled and

rode around them, back up the hill to cut them off. If one housecarl was worth two Norsemen, one mounted Englishman had an even greater advantage. And up the hill, the gap that had opened in the shield wall could not be closed before the English horse came riding in. “The circle broke and fell back,” says the *Morkinskinna*, “and many of King Harald’s men were killed.”

Was the raven on Land-Waster flapping its wings, or drooping in defeat? Certainly Harald must have recalled the critical moment at Stiklestad, when his brother Olaf’s *svinfylking* failed to vanquish the peasant army and instead found itself enveloped. With his own formation surrounded, disintegrating, the king knew the moment had come to take whatever came, victory or death, upon himself.

Every man alive must now and again wonder how he will fare when he stares death in the face. In medieval times, to kill or be killed was part of life. Men were familiar with it, and none shirked from it, a Viking least of all. The famous – infamous – berserkers of Norse lore, the bear-soldiers and boar-soldiers and wolf-soldiers who reveled in blood and death, were said to work themselves into a mindless, bloodthirsty killing rage, the *berserkergang*, in which they howled like animals, chewed their shields, ignored all wounds and slew anything, friend or foe, that got in their way. (Part of the reason they wore animal furs was so friends could recognize them for what they were, and give them plenty of space.) Today it is fashionable to ascribe going berserk to drug use – mushrooms, henbane or sheer amounts of alcohol – because these days that’s the only way most people can wrap their minds around it.

Artificial drugs were not necessary, though. For the Vikings fearlessness was simply a state of mind. Their attitude toward death in battle was perhaps best set down a century after Stamford Bridge, in *Sverris Saga*, about King Sverrir Sigurdsson of Norway (r. 1177–1202). Prior to the battle of Ilevollene in the Norwegian Civil Wars, on May 27, 1180 – well into the Christian era – a yeoman (farmer) of King Sverrir’s *fyrd* advised his son how to face death, in the most non-Christian terms:

“Renown lives longest after death,” he said. “If you were going into battle

and knew for certain you would die, how would you act?”

And the son answered, “What good would it do to not strike right and left?”

“And now,” said the yeoman, “if some one knew and told you in truth that you would not die in the battle?”

The son answered, “What good would it do to hold back from attacking as hard as I could?”

“One of two things will happen,” said the father, “in every battle you fight, either you will die or you will live. Be valiant, then, since death is predetermined. No one may send a man to his grave if it is not his time, and if he is doomed to die, no one can save him. To die running is the worst death of all.”

The Viking way was not to fear death, but to live for it, come what may. Stamford Bridge would be remembered as a battle of a few standing against many, in full expectance of death, and welcoming it in exchange for everlasting glory. For being remembered. That Viking Horatio on the bridge had known it, and, even if not by name, a thousand years later he is still remembered for it. Olaf had known it at Stiklestad, and Harald knew it too.

“King Harald Sigurdsson now fell into such a blood frenzy,” declares *King Harald’s Saga*, “that he broke out ahead of his troops, fighting two-handed.”

“Gripping his sword in both hands, he hewed left and right,” lauds the *Morkinskinna*. “He did not wait for his banner but cut his way through, slaying many champions in the process. It is agreed that no more valorous attack, made so boldly, has ever been seen. With both arms bloody, he struck down his enemies as though cleaving the very wind, fearing neither fire nor iron.”

“Neither helmets nor mail coats could protect against him,” the scribes proclaim, “and everyone in his way fell back before him. To all it seemed the English were going to be routed.”

At the foot of the hill King Harold turned to Leif, the exiled Norwegian still nursing a grudge against his former king, Harald of Norway. “What use are your archery skills, if you recognize the king but will not shoot him?”

But Leif well remembered the delirious vision he’d had while hanging on

the face of the Torghatten in Norway. He told his king, “I recognize him, but I dare not shoot him because of my vow to King Olaf.”

“I do not know why you came to this battle if you won’t do anything to help,” King Harold said. “Shoot, so I might see who he is. I am not afraid to shoot him because of this King Olaf.”

Over the struggling throng on the hilltop Leif could see Harald’s ornate helm gleaming beneath Land-Waster. Nocking a barbed arrow, he raised the bow and – putting his back and shoulders into it, for longbows with draw weights of a hundred pounds or more were not pulled purely by the arms[3] – drew fletching back to cheek, sighted over his fist, and released.

The arrow climbed the hill, crossed over the bloodily contested shield wall…

…and hit King Harald in the face.

“It struck his cheek,” declared Heming’s *thattr*, “and the arrow stuck fast in the skin.”

It was not a fatal injury, but face wounds bleed like no others. The barbed arrowhead was hooked in Harald’s mouth. Setting down his bloody sword, the king drew a knife, took it to himself, and with a quick slice cut the barb free. It was a nasty gash, but no worse than his old friend Halldor Snorrason had suffered in Sicily all those years ago, and Halldor had lived many years afterward.

Spitting blood, Harald must have looked around for his antagonist. Whether he recognized Leif – Heming – down the hill with bow in hand, no scribe has recorded, and none can say.

But his face, a shiny mask of red blood, marked out King Harald for all to see.

Down the hill, Leif lowered his bow. Whether by the Fates, sheer luck, or simply good storytelling, his vow was fulfilled. Plainly King Harald was wounded, but not badly, yet as St. Olaf had promised, Leif would be there at the king’s death. For now English King Harold took up his own bow, keeping an eye up the hill on his designated target.

“Compared to Leif,” declared the scribes, “all Harold lacked was that he was not as strong.” This was not a contest of strength, but of skill. From the events of the next few moments it is possible to discern the arrow Harold selected from his quiver was one of those incredibly nasty medieval ones,

with barbs wide as wings.

One king drew string to cheek and sighted in on another king.

“Then Harold Godwinson,” recorded the scribes, “shot King Harald in the throat.”

It may be a little too perfect to be totally believable, but as any good Norse saga would have it, kings are best killed by other kings.

“That was his death wound,” admits the *Morkinskinna* (though it claims Harald was hit by a javelin), “and he fell to the ground.”

Loss of blood equals loss of blood pressure equals loss of consciousness. By the manner of his end, the diagnosis is that Harald’s windpipe and voice box were not badly hurt, but that some of the veins, arteries and probably muscles in his neck had been cut. Clutching his wound to stanch the bleeding, the king kept his wits about him long enough to call for his trusty skald Thjodolf. “Come hold up my head, as I have for so long held up yours.”

Thjodolf knelt to prop up his liege. From his position Earl Tostig saw the king was down, and hastened over to ask if he was wounded.

“A small piece of iron has been sent me,” Harald said. “I presume it was forged for this very purpose.” By this time, as the blood poured out of him, the king would be losing strength, finding it difficult to speak. “You should come to terms with your brother,” he advised Tostig, “and tell him I accept that portion of the kingdom that he offered me.”

Tostig said, “We will both be the guests of the same fellow tonight.”

Harald replied, “You speak of the fellow whose hospitality I hoped never to accept.”

Then King Harald III of Norway died.

The Norwegians around him knew it, and by their reaction the rest of the Viking army knew it, and from their response the English knew, too, the King of Norway was dead. They raised a cheer. The fighting atop the hill paused, and King Harold rode up the slope to see if the Vikings, and his rebel brother, wished to continue. He announced to all within earshot that Tostig, and all the rest of the Norse who were still alive, would be granted quarter.

For his part Tostig took up the raven standard Land-Waster and claimed it

as his own, telling his brother that the Vikings still had a leader, “as long as I can fight.”

And the Norwegians answered as one. “They would accept no quarter,” declared the skalds. “They said they desired either victory, or to lie dead with their king.”

There was nothing to be done for it. “It was an evil moment when Norway’s king fell,” wrote Arnor Jarlaskald. “Gilded weapons laid him low, and all King Harald’s men preferred to die with him and share their brave king’s fate, rather than beg for mercy.”

The English king withdrew and left them to it.

The battle commenced again. “The fighting was hard but did not last long,” concedes the *Morkinskinna*. “The Norwegians fell in droves.”

Down the hill, the king and his retinue could see death closing in on the royal brother. It was Leif’s – Heming’s – turn to ask, “Why do you not wish me to shoot now, lord?”

Harold must have been recalling how, in the negotiations before the battle, Tostig had not betrayed him to the Vikings. He said, “I do not want to cause my own brother’s death.”

“Yet you would see your men fall instead,” Heming said. “If you do not forbid it, I will send him a little gift.”

At such times a king had to set aside personal feelings and be a king. Harold had been such for less than a year, but Englishmen – his subjects – were still dying on that hill, and only his obstinate brother’s death could put a stop to it. He told Heming, “I will not exact blood vengeance, even if he comes to harm.”

Heming took up his bow again and shot Tostig in the eye.

“This one sends me to God,” said Tostig, and fell down dead.

Again the battle paused, and again the English king, now grieving himself, offered the surviving Northmen quarter. But as the Fates would have it, at that moment the rest of the Viking army arrived from Riccall, led by Eystein Orri. He found Thjodolf and asked what had happened, and the skald, as was his way, answered in verse: “We are defeated. The army is trapped. Harald led his men from the east to no purpose. Now he has fallen, and with him the rest of us are like to as well.”

Eystein hadn’t come all that way to surrender. He looked around at the blood-spattered men who had been fighting, and the exhausted ones who had just arrived to join in. “Let us fight on, bravely,” he told them, “and care not for our own lives, even though we had hoped our expedition would result in more than our burial here.”

And with that the Northmen threw themselves at the English, who must have been amazed and horrified to realize that to end this fight, let alone win it, they might have to kill every last Norseman in England. They fell back down the hill, with some of them telling their king that the Vikings were not mere men.

“They are men,” Harold said, “and they have heart.”

Heart, but not endless stamina. After their all-afternoon combat, and the others from their armored run from Riccall, the Norsemen were just about played out. Nikulas Thorbergsson told his sister’s betrothed, Eystein, “We cannot keep up this fight forever.”

Eystein said, “True enough. Therefore, let us resort to guile. We will retreat to the woods. The Englishmen won’t chase us far, because they’re out of breath too. That will give us time to doff our armor and counterattack. This time, not for our lives, but for glory.”

Those Norsemen still able to fight, agreed.

Of course they did. They were Vikings.

On seeing them flee, the English cheered and – once again – offered quarter, only to be stunned again when the Northmen came swarming back out of the forest, now so heedless of their lives that they wore no armor and showed no desire to live. The casualties were even worse than before, especially among the Vikings. And they did not care.

This was almost more than even Anglo-Saxon housecarls, and certainly more than fyrdmen, could take. According to the scribes, they began deserting. The way to the English king lay open. Nikulas Thorbergsson took on Helgi Heinreksson, driving him backward so hard that Helgi could do nothing but keep from being killed, and Eystein went for no less than King Harold himself, getting so close that he hacked down the standard-bearer holding the royal banner of the Fighting Man.

But Heming, seeing Helgi being overwhelmed by Nikulas – and remembering, no doubt, how Nikulas, after Heming had saved him from drowning, had held King Harald by the waist to keep him from following

Heming over the precipice of the Torghatten – put an arrow into Nikulas' torso, at such close range that it went straight through. Heming drew another shaft and shot Eystein Orri in the armpit, into his heart, and "the Gorcock" died, as the scribes admitted, "with great honor."

Nikulas died as well, and Thjodolf too, and with them almost all the Vikings at Stamford. The few survivors fled into the woods, this time not feigning it. Styrkar *Stallari* made it back to Riccall by dint of cutting the head off the first local he came across, stealing his horse and clothes, and riding all the way. It was said that seventy years later the battle site on the rise above Stamford Bridge was still white with bones.

Young Prince Olaf, Tostig's son Skuli, and the Orkney earls Paul and Erlend had stayed with the ships at the landing, which is why they all lived. All night they received the few survivors of the Viking army who straggled into camp, and must have been devastated come morning when there were no more.

There was no hope of carrying on the invasion. As acting king, Olaf led a delegation to York to seek terms. King Harold, remarkably for a monarch of the day – one who had just won the greatest battle, if greatness is counted by magnitude of slaughter, in English history to that time – decreed that if the Norwegians swore oaths of peace, they would be free to return home. (He even freed his young nephew Skuli, who chose to stay with the Norwegians, and would number among his descendants his great-great-grandson, King Inge II of Norway.) Harold could afford to be magnanimous. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, of the 300 ships of the original invasion fleet, the survivors needed only twenty-four for the return journey.

The Anglo-Saxons were in little better shape. Their army had been decimated at Stamford Bridge, and whatever triumph the survivors enjoyed was short-lived. A week later, still in York, the king received word that on the 28th Duke William and the Normans had landed at Pevensey in the far south. Harold would have to recruit a fresh army on the way to meet them, for it was said by the scribes that on setting out for London he had no more than 500 men.

By the time Harold and the Anglo-Saxons met their destiny, the little Norwegian fleet was at sea, headed for the Orkneys. Olaf must have been agonizing over his next royal duty: how to tell his family the king had been

killed. Little did he know there was yet more tragedy in store. On their arrival at Birsay they learned that, on the very day her betrothed Eystein Orri and her father King Harald had died at Stamford Bridge, young Princess Maria had fallen down dead.

"People said," the sagas tell of Harald and his daughter, "they shared the same life."

NOTES

1 Heming's *thattr*, from which much of the ensuing account of the battle of Stamford Bridge derives.

2 Medieval palfreys, traveling horses bred for their smooth "ambling" gait, would be able to maintain a speed comparable to a canter over a much longer distance, but this was a question of time.

3 Historians quibble whether the English used longbows in this period, largely because archers on the Bayeux Tapestry are shown using short bows, but a yew longbow found in Somerset in the southwest of England has been dated to 2665 BC. Robin Hood's famous yew bow aside, medieval bowyers thought English elm superior to English yew, and that also inferior to Scandinavian yew.

EPILOGUE: THE LAST VIKING

Denmark's noble enemy
Always fought with courage.
Harald showed by example
That heart is half the victory.

Thjodolf Arnorsson

By the time the would-be Viking conquerors arrived home, Harold Godwinson himself lay dead atop the ridge at Hastings – killed, like his brother Tostig, by an arrow in the eye – as the knights of Duke William of Normandy (soon to be crowned William I, the Conqueror) rode past on their way to London. As Harald envisioned, England indeed became part of an empire, but instead of Norse it was Norman. Who can say how history might have changed, if the English hadn't exhausted themselves marching all the way up to Stamford Bridge to fight Harald and back down again to fight William?

The Norwegian invasion of September 1066 traditionally marks the end of the Viking Age, but it was not the last such attempted conquest. Three years later Svein of Denmark, who had turned down Tostig's invitation to invade England, joined forces with Edgar Aetheling, last heir of the Anglo-Saxon kings (whose mother may have been Elisaveta's youngest sister, Agatha). They succeeded in capturing York, but rather than fight them, William simply paid Svein off. Betrayed, Edgar went into exile in Scotland. Svein invaded again in 1074/1075, was repulsed again, and gave up for good.

The earls of northern England did not fare as well. Edwin and Morcar, their forces depleted after the disaster at Fulford, did not go south with King

Harold to Hastings, and though they submitted to Duke William they later supported Aetheling's claim to the throne. In 1071 William marched north against them. Edwin, attempting to escape to Scotland, was betrayed to the Normans and murdered. Morcar was apprehended and held captive for the rest of his life, probably dying in prison sometime after 1087. Waltheof son of Siward fought for King Harold at Hastings, survived, submitted to William, and six years later was appointed by him as Earl of Northumbria. He joined Svein's ill-fated invasion, for which William forgave him, but in 1075 made his own half-hearted rebellion, for which William finally had him beheaded.

If she had ever left Norway, Harald's queen Elisaveta returned home from the Orkneys, and in 1067 oversaw the marriage of their surviving daughter, Ingigerd, to Svein of Denmark's son Olaf, before being lost to history. With Svein's daughter Ingrid marrying Harald and Thora's son Olaf as well, the royal scions of Norway and Denmark finally united their kingdoms as their fathers never could. On top of that, when Svein's son King Olaf I passed away, his widow Ingigerd went from Queen of Denmark to Queen of Sweden by marriage to King Steinkel's grandson, Philip of Sweden.

Harald's consort Thora herself saw her eldest son assume Harald's throne as Magnus II, ruling jointly with his brother Olaf III, but like the earlier Magnus he died young, just twenty-one. It may be that the trauma of his father's death when he was just sixteen inspired the younger son Olaf, upon assuming sole kingship, to always avoid war. He is known to posterity as Olaf Kyrri, "the Peaceful." His reign of twenty-six years was a rare and welcome period of calm for medieval Norway.

As for his mother Thora, by some accounts she went on to marry, or become the concubine of, Svein of Denmark, or possibly King Hakon the Red of Sweden. Little is known of this Hakon, who succeeded King Steinkel, except that he came from Gautaland, the jarldom Steinkel had bestowed on Hakon, son of Ivar the White. Though his reign was brief, it is pleasant to speculate that the two might be one and the same, and that after being treated so shabbily by Harald, *Jarl* Hakon finally came into his own kingdom, taking care of both queens, Ragnhild and Thora.

In 1098, and again in 1102–03, Harald's grandson, Olaf's son Magnus III of Norway (by his consort, also named Thora, who may have been a daughter of Rognvald Brusason), called Magnus Barefoot, took after his grandfather.

He conquered the Orkneys, the Hebrides and the Isle of Man, and by treaty even reasserted some control over the Scots before being caught and killed in Ireland. A better raider than he was a king, Magnus was the last Norwegian monarch to die in a foreign land, and by that measure might be called the last of the Vikings. But he was nothing compared to his grandfather, Harald Hardrada, who left his mark across the entire medieval world and on the Middle Ages as well, from England to the Mediterranean.

After the withdrawal of the Byzantines from Sicily, the island's Arab Kalbid dynasty fell into squabbling little fiefdoms, and died out in 1053. In 1061 the Normans, by then well established under Roger I of Sicily, returned to finish what the Byzantines had started, and in thirty years completely conquered the island. In 1130 Roger II declared the Kingdom of Sicily, which would endure until 1816.

In 1048 the Berber Zirid dynasty in Tunisia broke with the Shi'ite Fatimid Caliphate in Cairo and recognized instead the Sunni Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad. In response the Fatimids sent two Bedouin armies to devastate North Africa. Reduced to a thin strip of land along the coast, the Zirids were soon conquered by the Normans. Their dynasty ended in 1152.

Over ensuing decades, rocked by famine, under pressure from the Seljuk Turks and Christian Crusaders, the Fatimid dynasty itself shrank until it controlled little more than Egypt. In 1169 it was abolished by its vizier, An-Nasir Salah ad-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub, who three years later became sultan and the founder of the Ayybid dynasty. He is remembered by the West as Saladin.

None of Harald's Byzantine compatriots outlived him. As has been noted, Maria Skleraina died shortly after returning to Constantinople. In June 1050 her rival, the empress Zoe, passed away, said to be still beautiful at the age of seventy-two. Her last husband, the emperor Constantine IX Monomachos, fell ill and died five years later, trying to the end to deny the throne to Zoe's sister Theodora. She was nevertheless proclaimed empress by the authority of – who else? – the Varangian Guard.[1] Eighteen months later, in August 1056, Theodora died, aged seventy-six, unmarried and childless to the end, the last of the Macedonian dynasty.

By then, as has also been noted, Grand Prince Yaroslav of Kiev was gone

too (1054), but as part of the peace treaty after the failed invasion of 1043 his son Vsevolod was given the hand of a Byzantine princess in marriage, a relative of Constantine Monomachos named Anastasia or possibly Maria. Their son, Vladimir Monomakh, went on to rule Kievan Rus as Grand Prince from 1113 to 1125.

According to the story of Heming, he and Helgi Heinreksson fought alongside King Harold at Hastings, and both survived to finally stand, shoulder to shoulder and undefeated, after the king fell. Rather than kill them, Duke William in admiration restored Helgi's earldom and took Heming into his service. Of course, the story also insists that King Harold himself survived Hastings, becoming a monk under Heming's protection. William supposedly learned of the deception upon his former enemy's death, but rather than punish Heming, offered him a barony in return for the same kind of loyalty and devotion. Heming declined, however, instead taking the cloth and living out his days in the same monastery cell as his former king.

"King Harald was a powerful king who ruled with an iron hand," summed up Snorri. "He was so clever that it is said no Scandinavian king was his match in intelligence and ability. He was a fearless, aggressive champion, very strong and better skilled with weapons than anyone…. Such are the legends of King Harald that people in this country still hold dear."

When, upon finally completing his *Heimskringla*, Snorri finally set down his quill pen, got up to stretch and went back outside, one likes to imagine the arctic sun having arisen over the Reykjadalsa Valley and steam wafting invitingly off the water of his hot pool, the Snorralaug. That year, 1230, Norway was in the ninth decade of a bloody civil war that had seen no fewer than two dozen rival kings and pretenders laying claim to the throne, but in Iceland Snorri was at the height of his career. Like Harald Hardrada, he was the most powerful *godi*, chieftain, in the land, but that did not mean his power – secured not by strength, but mainly on his renown as a wordsmith – was secure. Also like Harald, Snorri was distrusted by his rivals, including even his own relatives among the Sturlung clan. He was an open supporter of union with Norway under King Hakon IV, who more than any other Norwegian king in the past century – and like Harald – had proven both willing and able to crush all opposition in order to forge peace. For that,

Snorri admired him, but the rest of Iceland feared him.

Over the ensuing years Icelandic politics devolved into clan warfare and mutual murders. Snorri knew that only a hard-hearted overlord worthy of the sagas, like Harald Hardrada, could unite them, but could not find that man in himself. He raised an army against his own brother Sigvat and nephew Sturla Sigvatsson, but the day before battle relented, or lost his nerve, and offered them terms. By 1237, his power waning, he decided to abandon Iceland and serve Hakon directly, in Norway.

Hakon, however, was just as overbearing and distrusting a king as Harald. Within two years Snorri, of little use in Norway and with his loyalty in doubt, was virtually a prisoner. When he escaped back to Iceland he hoped to reassume his high chieftainship there, but by that time no one on either side trusted him. His feuds with his fellow Icelanders, though he sought to fight them in the courts, almost led to renewed civil war. Meanwhile Hakon sent word by secret messenger to an opposing *godi*, Snorri's former son-in-law Gizur Thorvaldsson, putting a bounty on Snorri's head.

On September 23, 1241 – two days short of 175 years after the death of Harald Hardrada – Gizur led seventy men in a surprise raid on Snorri's lodge at Reykholt. Snorri, by then aged sixty-two, heard them break down his door and, in his nightshirt, sought hiding. He may have been making for his writing studio and the secret staircase that spiraled down from it to the tunnel of the Snorralaug, but his ex-son-in-law doubtless knew of the passage and sent men to head him off. Snorri ended up hiding behind some barrels in his cellar. His own priest tipped off the attackers. Gizur ordered five men down after him. One Arni, whose patronymic is lost but who is remembered in the *Sturlunga Saga* as Arni the Bitter, raised his sword. Snorri is said to have pleaded for his life – "Do not strike!" – in vain. To the last he was no fighting man.

His murder, though, was vilified in both Iceland and Norway. Arni, later captured in battle, was executed for it, being told, "If you are spared, nobody remembers Snorri Sturluson."

And if not for Snorri, who would remember Harald Hardrada?

We all would – like that anonymous Viking defender of Stamford Bridge, if not by name, then by deed. Whether we would acclaim or blame Harald for

his deeds is another question. Men of consequence are not always heroic. If Harald lived today he would not be the same man he was then, just as modern Scandinavians are hardly the Vikings they were then. Everyone must be measured by the standards of their time, and even Harald's contemporaries were divided in their regard for him. The *Agrip af Noregskonungasogum*, the *History of Norwegian Kings*, says, "King Harald assumed sole rule over all of Norway and did so with great ruthlessness, yet peacefully. There was no other king who, because of his wisdom and his deeds, inspired as much admiration in all his people."

The Norwegian monk Theodoricus Monachus took a more circumspect view: "Harald was vigorous, intuitive and decisive, eager to war, protective of what was his and desirous of everyone else's."

He was was a very successful soldier, though not a very successful conqueror, having failed to claim either Denmark or England. His royal blood gave him a head start in life, but for all that he was, if not a kind king, a successful king, as defined by surviving to found his own dynasty. He was ruthless in the service of his own ambition and killed, even wantonly, in pursuit of his goals, but there's a certain honesty in that. In today's more democratic times the ambitious use propaganda, marketing and outright lies to achieve power, and have their killing done for them, on a much larger scale. They make Harald, who achieved his ends by the strength of his sword arm, seem… quaint.

He was in many ways a man who had outlived his age, and more than any other he was the man who put an end to that age. Almost three centuries of Norse conquest, expansion and colonization ended in eighteen years of vicious infighting between Scandinavians, largely at Harald's instigation, and suffered its final setback in his defeat at Stamford Bridge. With that in mind, it is appropriate to call Harald Hardrada the Last Viking – the last of those wild reavers who marched down out of the cold and windy North, once feared and hated, but now often viewed, even admired, with romantic nostalgia.

Times change. As in Byzantium a millennium past, men who were once called heroes are cast down and called villains, while scoundrels are held up to acclaim, all according to the prevailing narrative of the day. The hindsight of a thousand years offers little clarity, when none but the dead can know the ultimate truth. Who can say what our descendants, a millennium hence, will

make of us? The study of the past really is like peering into a dense fog. It’s our futile efforts to make sense of the present, however, that leave so many of us wistful for the simple day of the sword.

NOTE

1 After Hastings the ranks of the Guard were filled out with expatriate Anglo-Saxons fleeing Norman England, some of whom may have fought Harald at Stamford Bridge. It seems they took his example to heart.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

A comprehensive list of sources and links is given in the bibliography, but for quick reader convenience a brief summary of primary sources to which the text refers is given below.

SCANDINAVIAN SOURCES

The Norse sagas, including Snorri's *Heimskringla*, the *Morkinskinna* and the *Fagrskinna*, would all be referenced and in some cases repeated almost verbatim in the *Flateyjarbok*, circa 1394. At 225 written and illustrated vellum pages, it is the largest medieval Icelandic manuscript, written by two anonymous priests and preserved as an heirloom on Flatey, "Flat Island," in northwest Iceland.

Theodoricus Monachus was a 12th-century Benedictine monk, probably at Nidarholm Abbey, in the island of Munholmen in Trondheim Fjord. (Nidaros was the medieval name for Trondheim.) Despite its author being Norwegian – Theodoricus being a latinization of the Norse name Thorir, and Monachus that of *munkr*, monk – his *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* (*An Account of the Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*), circa 1177–88, makes extensive use of Icelandic sources and is not overly kind to its subjects.

As the writing style and topic of the anonymous *Agrip af Noregskonungasogum* (*A Synopsis of the Sagas of the Kings of Norway*) indicate an origin in Nidaros around the same time (*c*. 1190), it may also be attributable to Theodoricus, or may have been written in response to him. It takes a more sympathetic view of the kings of Norway than does Theodoricus, but is more concerned with their subjects, for whom bad kings

were sources mostly of taxes and suffering.

The *Historia Norwegiae* was written in the mid-1100s by an anonymous monk.

Thjodolf Arnorsson, Harald Hardrada's favorite court poet, is believed to have died in battle at the king's side.

Little is known of Thjodolf's brother and fellow skald, Bolverk Arnorsson, except that he, too, wrote extensively about Harald.

Icelander Sigvat Thordarson the Skald was court poet to Knut the Great, Magnus the Good of Norway, Onund Jacob of Sweden, and most famously to Norway's Olaf II, whom he also served as marshal in time of war.

EUROPEAN SOURCES

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was begun during the reign of England's Alfred the Great (871–899) and updated, through several editions in various monasteries, for 250 years through 1154. Though not unbiased, when viewed in its entirety the *Chronicle* remains the most important source of English history from the Roman period up into that of the Normans.

Saint Nestor the Chronicler, a monk in the Monastery of the Caves in Kiev, is thought to be the author or assembler of the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, also known as *The Tale of Bygone Years*, the earliest known East Slavic chronicle, around the year 1113. He advocated for Scandinavian, as opposed to Byzantine, influence in Kievan Rus.

Adam of Bremen, a German monk and chronicler, wrote the *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* (*Deeds of Bishops of the Hamburg Church*) circa 1075 on behalf of Archbishop Adalbert of Hamburg-Bremen, to justify his ecclesiastical claim over all Scandinavia. Adam spent time in the court of the Danish king Svein II Ulfsson, which colored his interpretation of events concerning the English and Norwegians, but he includes details not mentioned elsewhere.

Saxo Grammaticus ("Saxo the Literate" or "the Grammarian"), a 12th-century Danish theologian and historian, began his career as a soldier before joining the clergy. His sixteen-volume *Gesta Danorum* (*Deeds of the Danes*), begun around 1185 and not completed until about 1216, borrows from Adam of Bremen and shares his opinion of the English and Norwegians. Saxo conflates mythical and historic events to glorify his subject and his veracity is

sometimes questionable, but like Snorri's work his is valuable for flavor. Saxo tells a version of the popular Icelandic fable, "The Story of Heming," which appears in several versions in various sagas and may even have served as a basis for the story of William Tell.

William of Malmesbury, son of a Norman father by an English mother, has been called "the most learned man in twelfth-century Western Europe." His *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (*Deeds of the Kings of the English*), completed in 1125 and updated in 1127, ranks high among the great histories of England. William is renowned for his engaging style, sharp insights and fondness for anecdotes.

The Anglo-Norman chronicler Geoffrey Gaimar was less an historian than a translator of Old English into Anglo-Norman. Half of his *L'Estoire des Engleis* (*History of the English People*), written between 1136 and 1140, is a translation into verse of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, but includes additional material from unknown French and Latin sources.

John of Worcester, a monk of Worcester Priory, wrote his *Chronicon ex chronicis* (*The Chronicle*) around 1140 from material compiled by his predecessor, Florence of Worcester, who died in 1118.

William of Poitiers, Frankish-Norman priest, childhood friend of and later chaplain to Duke William of Normandy, was once himself a Norman soldier and knight. He wrote *Gesta Willelmi ducis Normannorum et regis Anglorum* (*The Deeds of William, Duke of Normandy and King of England*) as a panegyric to the duke and in part to justify the Conquest. In 1066 William of Poitiers, as a member of the duke's household, was at the battle of Hastings and offers a unique view of the events of that year, but his account is often called into question or contradicted due to its pro-Norman bias.

Amatus of Montecassino was an 11th-century Benedictine monk whose *L'Ystoire de li Normant* (*History of the Normans*), originally in Latin but translated into French, is the earliest known account of the Norman conquest of Sicily.

Amatus's fellow Benedictine, Geoffrey Malaterra, lived in Apulia in southern Italy before becoming a monk in Catania, in Sicily. Like Amatus, he wrote his history, *De Rebus Gestis Rogerii Calabriae et Siciliae Comitis et Roberti Guiscardi Ducis fratris eius* (*The Deeds of Count Roger of Calabria and Sicily and of Duke Robert Guiscard his brother*), in the 1090s. Both Amatus and Geoffrey were very pro-Norman in their views.

Their contemporary William of Apulia also chronicled the Norman conquest of southern Italy in his epic poem, *Gesta Roberti Wiscardi* (*The Deeds of Robert Guiscard*). William, however, was probably not a monk but an educated layman, and possibly even a Lombard judging by his sympathetic treatment of them.

The Benedictine chronicler, artist and cartographer Matthew Paris wrote and illustrated *La estoire de seint aedward le rei* (*The Life of King Edward the Confessor*) in the 1230s or 1240s. The only surviving manuscript is thought to be a somewhat later copy of his original, which was in turn based on a similar work by the Cistercian monk Aelred of Rievaulx around 1160.

Henry of Huntingdon, archdeacon in the Diocese of Lincoln, authored the *Historia Anglorum* (*The History of the English*), first published circa 1129 and eventually entailing five editions including events up to the year 1154. It was Henry who recorded the story of Viking King Knut vainly forbidding the tide to come in, though his point was that Knut was demonstrating to his courtiers the limits of kingly power compared with that of God: “Let all men know how empty and worthless is the power of kings, for there is none worthy of the name, but He whom heaven, earth, and sea obey by eternal laws.”

BYZANTINE SOURCES

Anna Komnene (or Comnena) was a Byzantine princess and polymath: a physician and hospital administrator, besides being a scholar and historian. It’s thought she wrote her *Alexiad*, about the reign of her father, Emperor Alexios I Komnenos, after his death as part of an effort to disparage and depose her younger brother, Emperor John II Komnenos, which failed.

Emperor Constantine VII Flavius Porphyrogenitus, fourth emperor of the Macedonian dynasty, is probably more famed for his books, including the imperial instruction manuals *De Administrando Imperio* and *De Ceremoniis*. He was the great-grandfather of the empresses Zoe and Theodora.

Leo VI, the Wise, the second ruler of the Macedonian dynasty, either wrote or sponsored the military treatise, the *Taktika*, which may have inspired his son Constantine VII to write his own manuals.

The *Strategikon of Kekaumenos*, popularly thought (without direct evidence) to be written by the 11th-century Byzantine general Katakalon

Kekaumenos, or perhaps his son, includes personal insights into the intrigues and personalities of the Byzantine imperial court.

Michael Psellos ("the Stammerer") was a lowly court secretary at the time of our story, but went on to become a Byzantine politician, historian and monk, an advisor to no fewer than four emperors, and author of the *Chronographia* (*Chronicle*), a history of fourteen emperors and empresses.

Little is known of John Skylitzes other than he was a commander in the Byzantine palace watch and a courtier of high rank during the late 11th century. His *Synopsis of Histories* covers the emperors from Nikephoros I in 811 to Michael VI in 1057.

Turkish-born Michael Attaleiates (*c*. 1022–80), Byzantine judge and historian, knew Psellos in his youth and Skylitzes in his older years. His *History* of the Byzantine Empire 1034–79 serves as a counterpoint to Psellos and may have been a source work for Skylitzes.

Historian and chronicler Aristakes Lastivertsi was an abbott in the Armenian Church, whose *History*, written in the 1070s, covers the wars in Anatolia, from Harald's time in the 1030s to the Battle of Manzikert against the Seljuk Turks in 1071.

In the 12th century Armenian historian Matthew of Edessa was the superior abbot of the "Red Convent" in the city of Marash (modern Kahramanmaras in southeast Turkey) in the time of of kings Baldwin I and Baldwin II of Jerusalem. A member of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Matthew opposed the Greek and Latin churches, and as an Armenian, he disliked both the Crusaders and Muslims who impinged on Armenian territory. His *Chronicle*, however, is the only primary source for events of his time and place.

ARAB/MUSLIM SOURCES

Ahmad ibn Fadlan was an Arab member of a 10th-century delegation from the caliph of Baghdad to the king of the Bulgars. His account, the *Risala* (Journal), is most famous for its description of the Kievan Norse, whom he visited in his travels.

Ahmad ibn Rustah was a 10th-century Persian explorer and geographer who journeyed as far north as Novgorod for his firsthand account of the Rus.

As a member of the royal court of Persia, Afghan geographer and historian Abu Sa'id Gardezi wrote a history of Persia and Anatolia up to the year 1032.

Eleventh-century Andalusian-Arab historian and geographer Abu al-Bakri wrote of Europe, North Africa and Arabia, but only secondhand, as he lived his whole life in what is now Spain.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adam of Bremen. *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*. Translated by Francis J. Tshan. Columbia University Press, 2002.

Ágrip Af Nóregskonungasögum (*A History of Norway and the Passion and Miracles of the Blessed Óláfr*). Translated by M. J. Driscoll, Viking Society for Northern Research. University College London, 2001. http://www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Text%20Series/Historia%26Passio.pdf

Ahrweiler, Hélène. *Byzance et la Mer.* Presses Universitaires de France, 1966.

Alfonsi, Laura and Francesca Cinti. "The Kinematics of the 1033 A.D. Earthquake Revealed by the Damage at Hisham Palace (Jordan Valley, Dead Sea Transform Zone)." *Seismological Research Letters*, vol. 84, no. 6, Nov–Dec 2013, pp. 997–1002. https://www.academia.edu/5028445

Amatus of Montecassino. *The History of the Normans*. Edited by Graham A. Loud. Translated by Prescott N. Dunbar. Boydell Press, 2004.

French text at http://remacle.org/bloodwolf/historiens/aimecassin/livre1.htm

Andersson, Theodore Murdock and Kari Ellen Gade. *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030–1157).* Cornell University Press, 2012.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Translated by G. N. Garmonsway. J. M. Dent & Sons. Everyman's Library edition, 1953.

Aristakes Lastivertsi, *History Regarding the Sufferings Committed by Foreign Peoples Living Around Us*. Translated by Robert Bedrosian. 1985. http://www.attalus.org/armenian/altoc.html; also at https://ia600203.us.archive.org/9/items/AristakesLastivertsisHistory/Aristakes.pdf

Arnott, Megan. "Female Characters' Contributions to the Characterization of Haraldr Hardrádi." Academia.edu: http://www.academia.edu/29219087

Attaleiates, Michael. *Michael Attaleiates: The History 1034 to 1079.* Translated by Anthony Kaldellis and Dmitris Kallis. Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, Harvard University Press, 2012.

Baragona, Stephen Alan and Elizabeth Louise Rambo. *Words That Tear the Flesh: Essays on Sarcasm in Medieval and Early Modern Literatures and Cultures.* De Gruyter, 2018.

Battle of Fulford 1066. http://www.fulfordbattle.com/

Battle of Fulford – 20 September 1066. http://www.battleoffulford.org.uk

Biały, Kamil. "From Conquest to the Failed Usurpation: Career of a Typical Byzantine Commander George Maniakes." *Proslogion* 14 (2016), pp. 171–85.

https://www.academia.edu/19830540/From_Conquest_to_the_Failed_Usurpation_Career_of_a_Typical
185

Blöndal, Sigfús. *The Varangians of Byzantium: An Aspect of Byzantine Military History.* Translated by Benedikt S. Benedikz, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Brightwell, Jenna. “Pechenegs.” Russia’s Periphery. https://russiasperiphery.blogs.wm.edu/central-asia/general/pechenegs-2/

Brown, Gordon S. *The Norman Conquest of Southern Italy and Sicily*. McFarland & Company, 2003.

Chareyron, Nicole. *Pilgrims to Jerusalem in the Middle Ages*. Columbia University Press, 2005.

“Cherven Towns – A Medieval Polish Settlement from the 10th Century.” *Medieval Histories*, 12 July 2018. https://www.medieval.eu/cherven-towns-a-medieval-polish-settlement-from-the-10thcentury/

Ciggaar, Krijnie. “Harald Hardrada: His Expedition Against the Pechenegs.” *Balkan Studies* 21 (1980), pp. 385–401. https://ojs.lib.uom.gr/index.php/BalkanStudies/article/view/2116/2140

Comnena, Anna. *The Alexiad*. Medieval Sourcebook, Fordham University, 2019. https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/AnnaComnena-Alexiad00.asp#BOOK%20I

Constantine Porphyrogenitus. *De Administrando Imperio*. Edited by Gy. Moravcsik. Translated by R. J. H. Jenkins. Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1967. https://homepage.univie.ac.at/ilja.steffelbauer/DAI.pdf

Cook, John Granger. *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World*. Mohr Siebeck, 2018.

D’Amato, Dr. Raffaele. “A Protospatharios, Magistros, and Strategos Autokrator of 11th Cent.: The Equipment of Georgios Maniakes and His Army According to the Skylitzes Matritensis Miniatures and Other Artistic Sources of the Middle Byzantine Period.” *Porphyra* (2005). http://www.porphyra.it/Supplemento4.pdf

D’Amato, Raffaele. *The Varangian Guard: 988–1453*. Osprey Publishing, 2010.

Dark, K. R. and A. L. Harris. “The Last Roman Forum: The Forum of Leo in the Fifth Century.” *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 48 (2008), pp. 57–69. https://grbs.library.duke.edu/article/viewFile/831/911

Dawson, Timothy. *The “Varangian Rhomphaia”: A Cautionary Tale*. http://grecoroman-army.blogspot.com/2015/05/the-varangian-rhomphaia-cautionary-tale.html

DeVries, Kelly. *The Norwegian Invasion of England in 1066*. Boydell Press, 2003.

DeVries, Kelly. “Medieval mercenaries: methodology, definitions and problems.” In *Mercenaries and Paid Men: The Mercenary Identity in the Middle Ages*. Edited by John France. 2008. Proceedings of Conference held at University of Wales, Swansea, 7th-9th July 2005. Brill, p. 58. https://epdf.pub/queue/mercenaries-and-paid-men-the-mercenary-identity-in-the-middle-ages.html

Eyrbyggja saga (*The Saga of the Ere-Dwellers*). Translated by William Morris and Eirikr Magnusson. 1892. https://sagadb.org/eyrbyggja_saga.en

Fagrskinna, a Catalogue of the Kings of Norway. Translated by Alison Finlay. Brill, 2004.

Gaimar, Geoffrey. *The Anglo-Norman Metrical Chronicle Printed for the First Time in Entire from the MS. in the British Museum: With Illustrative Notes and an Appendix Containing the Lay of Havelok, the Legend of Ernulf, and the Life of Herward*. Edited by Thomas Wright. J. Russell Smith, 1850.

Garland, Lynda. “Zoe Porphyrogenita (Wife of Romanus III, Constantine IX, and Michael IV).” Roman Emperors – DIR Pulcheria, University of New England, Australia. http://www.roman-emperors.org/zoep.htm

Gil, Moshe. *A History of Palestine, 634–1099*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Hamm, Michael F. *Kiev: A Portrait, 1800–1917*. Princeton University Press, 1993. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vjv1f; also at http://assets.press.princeton.edu/chapters/s5285.pdf

Heath, Ian. *Byzantine Armies 886–1118*. Osprey Publishing, 1979.

Henry of Huntingdon. *The Chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon*. Edited by Thomas Forester. H. G. Bohn, 1853. https://archive.org/details/chroniclehenryh01foregoog

“Hemings Þáttr (‘The Story of Heming’).” Translated by Anthony Faulkes. Viking Society for Northern Research, 2016. www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Hemings%20thattr.pdf

Hurstwic: Viking Combat Training. http://www.hurstwic.org

Jackson, Tatjana. “Harald, Bolgara Brennir, in Byzantine Service.” In *Scandinavia and the Balkans: Cultural Interactions with Byzantium and Eastern Europe in the First Millennium AD*. Editors O. Minaeva and L. Holmquist. Cambridge, 2015, pp. 72–82. www.academia.edu/17544595/Harald_Bolgara_brennir_in_Byzantine_Service_Scandinavia_and_the_

Jakobsson, Sverrir. “The Varangian Legend. Testimony from the Old Norse Sources.” In *Byzantium and the Viking World*. Uppsala Universitet, 2016, pp. 345–62. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304488151_The_Varangian_Legend_Testimony_from_the_

Jeffreys, M. et al., *Prosopography of the Byzantine World, 2016*. King’s College London, 2017. http://pbw2016.kdl.kcl.ac.uk

Jones, Charles. *The Forgotten Battle of 1066: Fulford*. The History Press, 2009.

Keens, Lucy Anne. “Scenes of a sexual nature: theorising representations of sex and the sexual body in the sagas of the Icelanders.” University College London, PhD in Scandinavian Studies, July 2016. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1529348/1/Keens_161123%20Lucy%20Keens.pdf

Kekaumenos. “Consilias et Narrationes, VII: Advice to an Emperor.” Sharing Ancient Wisdoms, Humanities in the European Research Area. https://ancientwisdoms.ac.uk/mss/viewer.html?viewColumns=greekLit:tlg3017.Syno298.sawsEng01

Konstam, Angus. *Byzantine Warship vs Arab Warship: 7th–11th Centuries*. Osprey Publishing, 2015.

La Rus, Sofia, and Mka Lisa Kies. “Women’s Clothing in Kievan Rus.” Academia.edu. http://www.academia.edu/8921162/Kievan_Rus_womens_clothing

The Laxdaela Saga. Translated by Mrs. Muriel A. C. Press. Edited by Israel Gollancz. J. M. Dent and Company, 1906.

Leo VI. *The Taktika of Leo VI*. Translated by George T. Dennis. Dumbarton Oaks, 2010.

Malaterra, Geoffrey. *The Deeds of Count Roger of Calabria & Sicily & of Duke Robert Guiscard his Brother*. Translated by Graham A. Loud. Unpublished, 2005. https://web.archive.org/web/20141010215811/http://medievalsicily.com/Docs/03_Norman_Conquest/

Marsden, John. *Harald Hardrada: The Warrior’s Way*. The History Press, 2012.

Matthew of Edessa. *The Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa*. Translated by R. Bedrosian. Sources of the Armenian Tradition. Long Branch, NJ, 2017. https://archive.org/details/ChronicleMatthewEdessa

“Mecca Winter Caravan.” In *Saudi Aramco World*. Jan/Feb 1964, pp. 10–12. https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/196401/mecca.winter.caravan.htm

McLynn, Frank. *1066: The Year of the Three Battles*. Pimlico, 1999. https://erenow.net/postclassical/1066-the-year-of-the-three-battles/

Monachus, Theodoricus. *An Account of the Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*. Translated by David McDougall and Ian McDougall. Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998. http://www.vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Text%20Series/Theodoricus.pdf

Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030–1157). Translated by Kari Ellen Gade and Theodore Murdock Andersson. Cornell University Press, 2012.

Mukaddasi (al-Maqdisi). *Description of Syria, including Palestine*. Palestine Pilgrims’ Text Society, 1886. https://archive.org/details/cu31924028534265

Nestor the Chronicler. *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*. Translated by Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd P. Sherbowitz-Westor. The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953. http://www.mgh-bibliothek.de/dokumente/a/a011458.pdf

Nicolle, David. *Armies of the Caliphates 862–1098*. Osprey, 2006.

O’Rourke, Michael. *Maniakes, Argyros and Guiscard: The Contest for Byzantine Italy, 1038–71*. Canberra, Australia, 2009.

O'Rourke, Michael. *The Byzantine Apogee, 976–1038*. Canberra, Australia, 2011.
O'Rourke, Michael. *The Navy and Marines of the Roman ('Byzantine') Empire in the 10th Century*. Canberra, Australia, 2009.
The Orkneyinga Saga. Translated by Jon A. Hjaltalin and Gilbert Goudie. Edited by Joseph Anderson. Edmonston and Douglas, 1873.
Pryor, John H. *Geography, Technology and War: Studies in the Maritime History of the Mediterranean, 649–1571*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
Pryor, John H. and Elizabeth M. Jeffreys. *The Age of the Dromon: The Byzantine Navy Ca 500–1204.* Brill, 2006.
Psellos, Michael. *Chronographia*. Translated by E. R. A Sewter. Yale University Press, 1953. Fordham University Internet History Sourcebooks. https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/psellus-chronographia.asp
Rance, Philip. "The Date of the Military Compendium of Syrianus Magister (Formerly the Sixth-Century Anonymus Byzantinus)." In *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 100.2 (2007), pp. 701–37. Academia.edu. https://www.academia.edu/3676997/_The_Date_of_the_Military_Compendium_of_Syrianus_Magiste Century_Anonymus_Byzantinus_Byzantinische_Zeitschrift_100.2_2007_701-737
Saxo Grammaticus. *The First Nine Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus*. Translated by Oliver Elton with sections by F. York Powell. David Nutt, 1894.
Scott, Walter. *The Songs and Ballads of Sir Walter Scott: With His Life*. Philadelphia: Uriah Hunt & Son, 1845. Scott wrote his poem, "The Song of Harold Harfager," about the original Harald Harfager (in English, Harold Fairhair; supposedly reigned circa 872 to 930). As that Harald is now thought to be mythical and mistaken by early skalds for Harald Sigurdsson, who was called Fairhair during his life, the author has taken the liberty of applying it to the proper subject.
Siegecraft: Two Tenth-Century Instructional Manuals by 'Heron of Byzantium'. Edited by Dennis F. Sullivan. Dumbarton Oaks Studies XXXVI, 2001. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection. https://terpconnect.umd.edu/~sullivan/Siegecraft.pdf
Skylitzes, John. *A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811–1057*. Translated by John Wortley. Cambridge University Press, 2011.
Shaheen, Leila. "Manners in The Middle East." In *Saudi Aramco World*, 1965, pp. 26–32. https://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/196502/manners.in.the.middle.east.htm
Shepard, Jonathan. "Why Did the Russians Attack Byzantium in 1043?" In *Byzantinisch-Neugriechischen Jahrbücher* 22 (1978), pp. 174–212. https://www.academia.edu/18929404/Why_did_the_Russians_attack_Byzantium_in_1043
Sherrard, Philip. *Byzantium* (Great Ages of Man). Time-Life Books, 1972.
"The Skaldic Project: Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages." Skaldic Project, Brepols. https://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/db.php
Stone, Caroline. *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the Far North.* Penguin, 2011.
Storm, Gustav. *Harald Haardraade Og Vaeringerne*. Trykt Hos Carl C. Werner & Co., 1884.
"The Story of Heming." Translated by George Dasent. In *Icelandic Sagas, Vol. III: The Orkneyingers Saga.* Eyre and Spottiswoode of London, 1894. https://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/ice/is3/is323.htm
Sturluson, Snorri. *Heimskringla*. Translated by Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes. Vol. III. University College London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2015. http://vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Heimskringla%20III.pdf
Sturluson, Snorri. *King Harald's Saga: Harald Hardradi of Norway*. Translated by Magnús

Magnússon and Hermann Pálsson, Dorset Press, 1986.
Sturluson, Snorri. “The Sagas of Olaf Tryggvason and of Harald the Tyrant (Harald Haardraade).” Translated by Gustav Storm. Williams and Norgate, 1911.
Turco, Jeffrey. “Loki, Sneglu-Halli pattr, and the Case for a Skaldic Prosaics.” Purdue University, 2015. https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/55868
Turville-Petre, Gabriel. “Haraldr the Hard Ruler and His Poets.” Dorothea Coke Memorial Lectures, Viking Society Web Publications, 1966. http://vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Haraldr%20the%20hard-ruler.pdf
Volhv. “The Siege of Kiev by the Pechenegs and the Battle on the River Setall (1036).” *Steemit*. Feb 2018. https://steemit.com/history/@volhv/the-siege-of-kiev-by-the-pechenegs-and-the-battle-on-the-river-setall-1036
Wernick, Robert. *The Vikings*. Time-Life Books, 1979.
William of Apulia. “Gesta Roberti Wiscardi (The Deeds of Robert Guiscard).” Edited by M. Matthieu. Translated by G. A. Loud. Institute for Medieval Studies at the University of Leeds, 1963.
https://ims.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/29/2019/02/William-of-Apulia.pdf
William of Malmesbury. *William of Malmesbury’s Chronicle of the Kings of England. From the Earliest Period to the Reign of King Stephen.* Translated by J. A. Giles. H. G. Bohn, 1847. http://www.archive.org/details/williamofmalmesb1847will

PLATES



Portrait of Harald in stained glass, St. Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, Orkney Islands. The cathedral was founded in 1137 but renovated in 1845–51, when the artist gave the Norse king very Victorian-style mutton chop sideburns. (Colin Smith / *Harald Hardrada* / CC BY-SA 2.0)



Harald’s half-brother Olaf receives a fatal spear thrust from Thorir Hund. According to the sagas, he died under a near total eclipse of the sun. *Olaf the Saint Falls at the Battle of Stiklestad*, watercolor by Peter Nicolai Arbo (1859). (Photo by Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images)



From Sigtuna in Sweden to Kiev by river was a trip of well over 1,000 miles, covered at a few miles per hour. Boats hauled out and portaged around rapids were vulnerable to horse-borne steppe raiders. (Artwork by Steve Noon, © Osprey Publishing)



St. Sophia Cathedral in Kiev, Ukraine, was founded about 1011 but not finished until decades later. It contains the tomb of Harald’s father-in-law, Yaroslav the Great, and today is a UNESCO World Heritage site. (anmbph/iStock/Getty Images Plus)



Axe-wielding Norsemen inside the walls, a sight dreaded by medieval villagers from England and Scandinavia to Poland, Bulgaria, Anatolia and Sicily. Chain mail and round shields with simple designs were typical among the Vikings. (Artwork by Johnny Shumate, © Osprey Publishing)



The Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, named for the Greek word *sophia*, divine wisdom. After 1453 Constantiople's Ottoman conquerors, adding minarets, made it a mosque. In 1935 it became a museum, and in 2020 a mosque again. (Emad Aljumah/Moment/Getty Images)



Medieval napalm. The Byzantines’ ability to spray liquid flame on their enemies was so powerful that the formula for Greek fire was a state secret. Once lost, it has never been recovered. (Image taken from the holdings of the Biblioteca Nacional de España, CC BY 4.0)



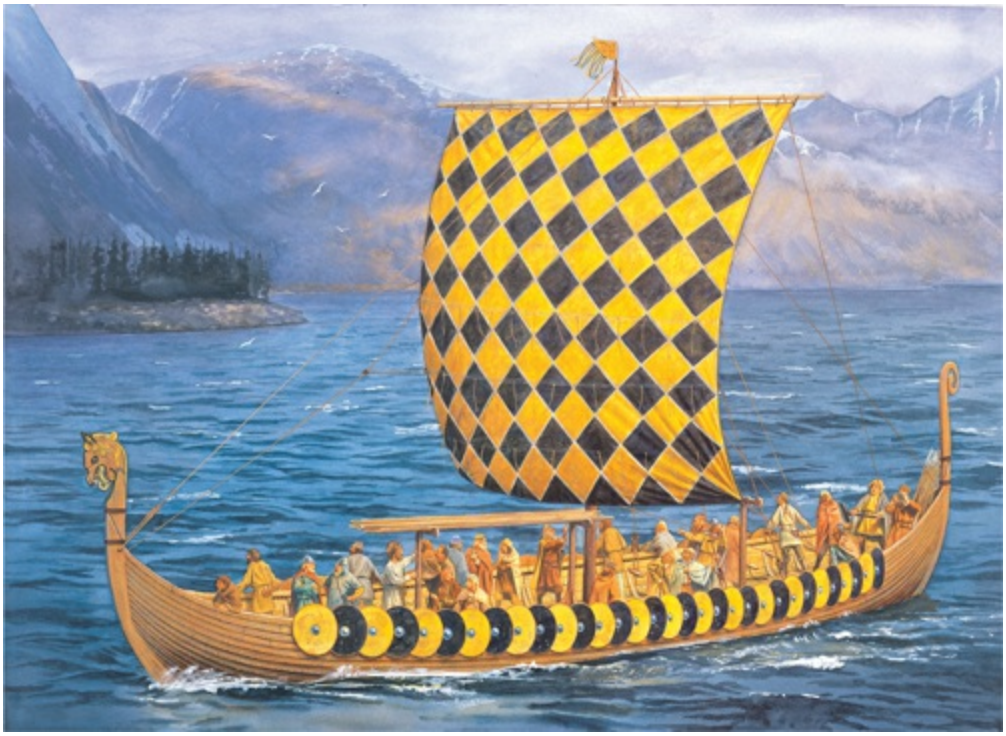
Byzantine general George Maniakes lands at Messina and captures the city from the Arabs, beginning his ill-fated Sicilian campaign. He would have nearly as much trouble with his lieutenant Harald as with the enemy. (Image taken from the holdings of the Biblioteca Nacional de España, CC BY 4.0)



Byzantine mosaic in the Hagia Sophia depicting Jesus between Empress Zoe Porphyrogenita and her third husband, Constantine IX, the only one to survive her. (DEA/G. DAGLI ORTI/DeAgostini/Getty Images)



The daughters of Yaroslav I. Left to right: Anne, Agatha, Elisaveta, Anastasia. This fresco in the St. Sophia Cathedral in Kiev was painted circa 1043 and may depict Elizaveta much as Harald saw her on his return. (SPUTNIK / Alamy Stock Photo)



The *drakkar* or dragon ship was the largest in the Viking inventory, but was slower than the more typical, smaller longship. (Artwork by Steve Noon, © Osprey Publishing)



Vikings were infamous for their lightning raids on land, but their sea battles, as off the River Nisa in 1062, were drawn-out, bloody affairs. The object was not to destroy the valuable ship, but to drive off or kill its crew. (Artwork by Johnny Shumate, © Osprey Publishing)



“Time-lapse” view of the Viking disembarkation and subsequent battle of Fulford, by 13th-century monk Matthew Paris. The helmets and heraldic shields are not period-correct, but Harald is shown wielding a very Viking battle axe. (History and Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo)



The battle of Stamford Bridge by Matthew Paris. Harald’s sigil was a black raven on white, not three axes on red, and according to the sagas he was killed by an arrow or javelin, not by a mounted knight. (The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo)



The Battle of Stamford Bridge, by Peter Nicolai Arbo (1870). Harald receives his death blow: an arrow to the throat. (The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo)



Monument to Harald Sigurdsson at Harald Hardrada's Place in Oslo, Norway. Inscription reads: “Harald Sigurdsson Hardrada, King of Norway, Founder of Oslo, 1015–1066.” Relief by Lars Utne, 1905. (Wolfmann, CC BY-SA 4.0)

OSPREY PUBLISHING
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
Kemp House, Chawley Park, Cumnor Hill, Oxford OX2 9PH, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace Dublin 2 Ireland
1385 Broadway New York NY 10018 USA
E-mail: info@ospreypublishing.com
www.ospreypublishing.com

OSPREY is a trademark of Osprey Publishing Ltd

First published in Great Britain in 2021
This electronic edition published in 2021 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

© Don Hollway, 2021

Don Hollway has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

For legal purposes the Acknowledgments constitute an extension of this copyright page.

Artwork in the plate section previously published in the following Osprey titles: NVG 47: Viking Longship (here and here) and WPN 66: Weapons of the Viking Warrior (here and here).

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB 978 1 4728 4652 5; PB 978 1 4728 4650 1; eBook 978 1 4728 4653 2;
ePDF 978 1 4728 4651 8; XML 978 1 4728 4649 5

Maps by www.bounford.com

Osprey Publishing supports the Woodland Trust, the UK's leading woodland conservation charity.

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.ospreypublishing.com. Here you will find our full range of publications, as well as exclusive online content, details of forthcoming events and the option to sign up for our newsletters. You can also sign up for Osprey membership, which entitles you to a discount on purchases made through the Osprey site and access to our extensive online image archive